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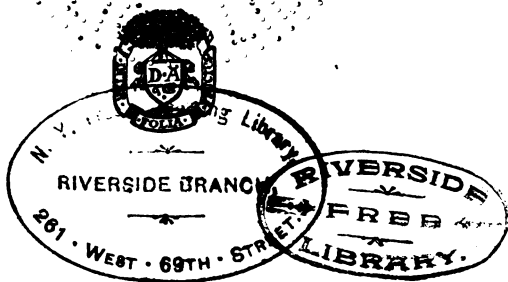
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A LITTLE MINX

A SKETCH

BY
ADA CAMBRIDGE

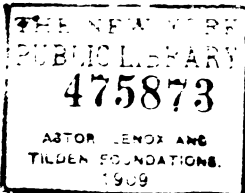
AUTHOR OF THE THREE MISS KINGS, NOT ALL IN VAIN, ETC.



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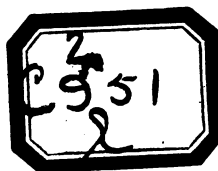


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A LITTLE MINX.

CHAPTER I.

ARCHDEACON BROWN wanted a curate—nothing more. He had everything else that a reasonable archdeacon, newly gaitered and shoyel-hatted, could desire for the present. His new parish was reckoned one of the best out of Melbourne; his congregation was prosperous, liberal, and still aglow with ardent welcome for him and his family; his parsonage, which that congregation had enlarged and improved on purpose for him, regardless of expense, was the most comfortable house imaginable; and his wife was cheerful and amiable in her new surroundings, calling him “Archdeacon” whenever she spoke to him—than which no term of endearment had been sweeter in his ears when they were young together—promising to be satisfied at last with the state of life to which it had pleased God to call her.

A LITTLE MINX.

Perhaps it is unkind to mention the fact that, like many another potentate both of Church and state, they had risen from very small beginnings—risen such a long way, that the very memory of their fathers and mothers seemed to have gone beyond recall—because the new parishioners were not aware of the circumstance, and, if they had been, would have attached no importance to it. Archdeacon Brown was their own archdeacon, the first they had had at Wooroona, and he was also their new incumbent, their new broom, their potential paragon, the long-desired regenerator of the parish, which had suffered from the shortcomings of all his predecessors; and they would not, at this auspicious moment, have heard a word to the discredit of him or his. They opened their arms to him, and to his wife, and to his daughters—took them all to their hospitable and enthusiastic hearts; and they did not care what the church debt ran up to, so long as the Browns were lodged and provided for in a fitting manner. They doubled the stipend with a stroke of the pen, reckless of the certain consequences in the shape of oft-repeated tea-meetings and a weary sequence of bazaars; and they gave the archdeacon a pulpit with a red velvet cushion on it for him to preach from in church; and for his own use and possession

a piano and a drawing-room carpet, a load of wood, a pig, a clutch of chickens, and a house-dog. They lent him a horse—nay, an assortment of horses—and they lent him a milch-cow; in short, they made him as comfortable as any parson in the diocese. There only remained to procure him a curate, who should take the rough bush-work off his hands, and enable him to conserve his precious strength and utilise it to the best advantage.

Inquiries were set on foot which resulted in the selection of the Reverend John Primrose for the post. "I believe," wrote the bishop to the arch-deacon, "that you will find him just what you want, and I shall be glad, for my part, to place him with you for a year or so, in order that he may acquire experience and undergo a proper training in bush-work before I entrust him with an independent charge. I fear he is not very strong, for the object of his coming to Australia is to benefit his health; but no doubt your beautiful climate will soon set him up, and counteract the slight consumptive tendency that I hear is all he suffers from. My commissary sends me the best accounts of his character and abilities. He is a gentleman and an M. A. of Cambridge, and he has done well during the two years he has been in

orders, as you will see by the testimonials I enclose. I expect him by the next mail, and will send him up to you as soon as he arrives. He brings his wife with him."

There was much more in the bishop's letter, treating of stipends and other business matters, but nothing of any interest compared with the last-quoted sentence. It was read aloud in the family circle, and was followed by a dramatic pause.

"His *wife*!" ejaculated Mrs. Brown and her two daughters in a breath; and they looked at each other.

"Dear me!" said Grace, the eldest daughter, with a disconcerted air. "Only two years in orders, and married already!"

"Most unnatural," said Charlotte, the youngest, with a slightly exasperated laugh. "A curate is always supposed to be at the service and disposal of his incumbent's daughters. I quite looked to have him to escort me out and about, and in due time to offer me his hand and heart."

"Why *you*, more than me?" demanded Grace.

"Hush, hush!" said Mrs. Brown. "Don't talk nonsense. I should be very sorry to have either of you thinking of marrying a curate. So far, it is a good thing that Mr. Primrose is out of the

question; his being married will doubtless save us many annoyances. Though I doubt"—looking at her husband—"whether the parish will approve of it."

"I can't see how it can matter to the parish," said the archdeacon.

Mrs. Brown made no immediate rejoinder; she was very thoughtful. "And do you think it is a good thing to have a man of that sort?" she presently inquired. "A Cambridge M. A.—some people make such a fuss of a university degree."

"They don't know anything of degrees here; it is all rubbish to them." The archdeacon cast aside the suggestion irritably, which was not his habit. Having begun his sacerdotal career in the Wesleyan denomination, and never having seen the inside of a university himself, he had a natural prejudice against university men; and he understood exactly what his wife meant when she appealed to it. At the same time he was flattered by the bishop's choice, and pleased to be entrusted with the training of Mr. Primrose. "It is a great thing to have a *gentleman* to work with you," he said, smoothing his silk waistcoat over his portly stomach.

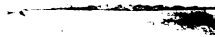
"It is—it is," assented Mrs. Brown, who had also recognised the compliment paid to her arch-

deacon's rank and merits. "It will make a great difference to us all, as he must necessarily be so much about the house. And if his wife is nice," she added hopefully, "it will be pleasant for the girls—very pleasant, and convenient in many ways."

They made up their minds that his wife would be nice, and that her domestic companionship and parochial assistance would be of the utmost value. They waxed quite fervent in their anticipations of the many ways in which she might be utilised, and of the great acquisition that she would be. And when they had done talking together, they went out to return calls, and to tell all the leading families of Wooroona about it.

"It will be so nice to have a lady who is *English*," said Mrs. Brown repeatedly, as she went from house to house; "the ordinary stamp of curate's wife I really could not have put up with."

And the leading families, though more or less prejudiced in favour of local produce as a general rule, agreed that it was certainly an advantage in a curate's wife to have been brought up at home. They suggested that it might be an advantage in a curate also—since colonial clergymen of the archdeacon's pattern were not to be



picked up every day. Upon the whole, it was manifest that Mrs. Primrose was to be hospitably received, though of course not with the enthusiasm that had attended Mrs. Brown's arrival. The air was still throbbing with the commotion of that event, and it was too early to get up steam again above a moderate pressure.

She—for that became her local designation—arrived on a Saturday evening. In the morning the archdeacon received a letter from her husband, in which that gentleman begged to thank Mrs. Brown for so kindly inviting him and his wife to the parsonage until they could establish themselves in a home of their own, and to intimate, with polite regrets, that they had made other arrangements. Mrs. Primrose thought it would give less trouble if they went to the hotel at once, and the landlord of the Black Swan had their rooms ready for them. He hoped to call upon the archdeacon in the evening, and was entirely at his service for the following day. There was no mention of travelling arrangements, and altogether the letter was not agreeable to Mrs. Brown.

"Why don't they come to us, when they know we expect them?" she rather imperiously demanded, "and how absurd to go to the Black

Swan—as if that was a proper place for them! As for giving trouble—rubbish! It is very nice of her to think of that, but she ought to have left me to know my own business best. If I had thought it a trouble, I should not have asked them.”

Mrs. Brown was put out by this little act of independence—unseemly independence on the part of young people in their position—and by the frustration of her carefully considered plans. Nevertheless, she took a walk to the Black Swan, carrying a bouquet for Mrs. Primrose with her; saw the landlady, overhauled the two rooms provided for the expected guests, suggested the bill of fare for their dinner—for it was seven-o'clock dinner they had ordered, not the modest and appropriate high tea—and was otherwise solicitous for their comfort and welfare. She left a message to the effect that she hoped to see them at the parsonage in the evening, and went home soothed.

It was summer weather, and the days were long. Her daughters were still playing tennis on the new-made lawn, as when she had left them an hour before, though preparations for the evening meal were visible through the dining-room windows. She sauntered into the garden and sat

down to watch them, with a smile on her face; she thought there were no such handsome or clever girls as hers in all that country, or in the wide world, and was so sure of it that she did not mind saying so when in a confidential mood. Grace was tall, with too wide shoulders and a too small waist; and though her hair, eyes, and complexion were good, her nose was broad and her lips thick—features that even the blindest mother had to own were “irregular,” and not usually regarded with admiration. Mrs. Brown owned it, but with a confident feeling that the whole was perfect if the parts were not. “What *is* it,” she would say, “that makes the child so good-looking? You see she has not a regular feature in her face, and yet one *must* remark her anywhere.” This was the modest way she spoke of Grace to her casual acquaintances; in the bosom of the family there were no reservations. It was boldly believed and declared that the eldest sister was faultlessly beautiful. She was herself—Grace Brown—and any other nose or mouth would have spoiled her. She had no possible rival, except Charlotte, the youngest. Mrs. Brown did think Lottie was as pretty as Grace when she was playing tennis and had a colour. Lottie thought so too; so did Grace. They were a mutual admira-

tion society. Charlotte was rather low in stature, but with a neat, slim figure—a better figure than her sister's; and her hair and eyes were dark, her nose straight, her lips thin, and her skin sallow and bloodless. If you had asked the opinion of the leading families of Wooroona, they would have told you that the Miss Browns—the blonde and the brunette, as they liked to be called—were nice, pretty, pleasant girls. That was the first impression they made upon the place. And so they were—as nice, pretty, and pleasant as ordinary girls, and no more and no less.

But Mrs. Brown, sitting down to look at them, was lost in admiration. She didn't know which of them looked most lovely, in her white cambric frock, with the flush and shine of excitement in her cheeks and eyes. "Which?" the mother asked herself, with a heart beating high; and it was a large question. It meant a great deal. On one side of the net the girls were playing as partners, and on the other a good-looking man of forty or thereabouts was beating them single-handed—not because he wished, but because he could not help it; and what Mrs. Brown wanted to know was this: "Which of them is the fairest in *his* eyes? Which of them will he ask for?"

For Mr. Colin Mackenzie was the great man of

the parish and neighbourhood—a wealthy widower, without encumbrance, and with a house that was the show-place of the district—everything that Mrs. Brown could wish for in a suitor for one or other of her incomparable girls, for whom so few were worthy. He was conventionally styled a squatter, but was only so in respect of vast runs in Queensland; all his noble property of Darriwell, three miles out of Wooroona, was his own. And he had lately returned from a course of European travel, undertaken to distract his mind after Mrs. Mackenzie's death, with an apparent intention to settle himself afresh, and therefore, in the order of nature, to take a second partner when he found one to suit him.

The archdeacon's wife had marked him for her own, and so had Grace. With that loyalty to one another which was characteristic of the family, Lottie forbore to prejudice her sister's interests by any pretensions on her own account. "Only, if he *should* choose me instead of you, you won't expect me to refuse him, will you?" she would say sometimes in moments of confidence. And Grace did not expect it, of course, though she felt that it was an unlikely contingency; and she "played fair"—with some unnecessary ostentation—being a most high-principled young lady. That he should choose

one of them was a thing settled in the household, and a thing that occupied a great deal of anxious attention. It had to be considered in connection with all other matters—even the advent of Mrs. Primrose. A curate's wife was regarded as innocuous as a woman, and as a chaperone she was expected to be invaluable. Many a little indulgence might be permitted in her company which the mother could not personally countenance without laying herself open to injurious remarks; and many a pleasant little arrangement had been suggested for the furtherance of cherished but unmentioned designs, depending entirely upon the good offices of Mrs. Primrose.

"I have been telling Mr. Mackenzie," said Grace, walking by his side towards her mother when the game was over, "that we are expecting our new curate and his wife to-night; and he says he and Mr. Primrose belong to the same college."

Mr. Mackenzie, who had arrived during her absence at the Black Swan, shook hands with his would-be mother-in-law, while she beamed upon the pair with her maternal eyes. He used to know a Harry Primrose when he was at Trinity, he said, and was told that this one was Jack, Harry's youngest brother, who had been a little schoolboy in those days. All the Primroses went to Trinity.

They were a nice family. He had once spent a Christmas at their house, and it was very jolly.

"Indeed!" Mrs. Brown responded, with her prim, company smile. "How very interesting! And what kind of boy was he?"

"A pale, lanky little scrap. We used to think him rather a ~~stuffy~~ and cry-baby; but then he was only nine or ten, and his people spoiled him. It was fifteen years ago and more. Of course, he is quite different now."

"I should hope so," said Mrs. Brown. "And do you happen to know anything of his wife?"

"Nothing at all. Until Miss Charlotte told me this afternoon, I did not know there was such a person. It seems very absurd—little Jacky with a wife."

"Not at all," retorted Lottie. "Why should it be absurd? I think it is very nice. We are very glad she is coming, and we are going to be very fond of her; and I hope you'll be polite, and call upon her and pay her proper attentions. If you do, we will reward you by taking her over to Darriwell as soon as we can to spend a long afternoon. You can show us the house and the gardens, and regale us with strawberries and cream. That will give her a pleasant impression of the country, to begin with.

"I shall be proud," said Mr. Mackenzie, "though I confess I don't expect much from Jack Primrose's taste. It will be very immature, I fancy."

"You wouldn't have a man of twenty-six married to an old woman, would you? We hope she will be a girl like ourselves, so that we can make a companion of her; and, of course, she will be," said Lottie. "I have made up my mind that she's charming."

"You had better stay and take tea with us," said Mrs. Brown, who had reckoned up the resources of her larder while this dialogue had been going on. "Then you will see her at once. They are to come in at nine o'clock."

Mr. Mackenzie hesitated, being a punctual and punctilious person in his own house, to be generally relied on by a reliable housekeeper, but he allowed himself to be persuaded to stay to tea. It was the first time he had done so, though he had had several invitations. His horse was put in the stable; he was taken to the archdeacon's room to wash his hands and brush his hair; and the girls put on their best dresses in his honour, while Mrs. Brown made hasty and lavish additions to the bill of fare. There was great though unacknowledged rejoicing over the event. No one believed that

Mr. Mackenzie had been induced to make himself so agreeable by the mere prospect of seeing Mrs. Primrose or of renewing his early acquaintance with the Reverend John.

And, after all, Mrs. Primrose did not appear. At nine o'clock the ladies were in the drawing-room with their guest, the archdeacon having retired to his study to look over his sermon, when the door-bell rang and Mr. Primrose was announced—only Mr. Primrose—a tall, thin, fair-whiskered, delicate-looking, gentle-mannered young man, in whom Mr. Mackenzie did recognise, though with an effort, his schoolboy friend. They made him very welcome; they were glad to see him; they liked him; they kept him late, and entertained him with wine and cake and their best conversation. But they were dissatisfied with him for not bringing his wife, and with her for not coming.

“She was tired after her journey, and was not inclined to see any one,” said Mr. Primrose, quite naturally. “I left her going to bed. I was sure you would not expect her to come when she was tired.”

“Oh, of course not,” replied Mrs. Brown; “and I suppose we shall see her *some time*.”

CHAPTER II.

So it was on Sunday morning that Mrs. Primrose made her first appearance in the parish. It was a bright and beautiful morning, and all the leading families went to church in force. Mr. Mackenzie drove from Darriwell in his large wagonette, bringing his housekeeper and half a dozen servants; and, though early in his pew (which was at the top of the church and at right angles to the parsonage pew), found it occupied by people who had been ousted from their own, waiting to see the new curate and the new curate's wife. The former, of course, was expected to be the great attraction. It had become generally known that there was a Mrs. as well as a Mr. Primrose, but until they saw her she did not count for much.

Mr. Primrose came in first, as the organ was playing, at the archdeacon's heels, and went to kneel down in the little chancel. He looked very nice indeed, in his well-cut garments, that were all fresh and spruce, with his long, white hands and

long, delicately featured face; and the congregation thoroughly approved of him. He read the lessons in a pleasant, gentlemanly voice, and, though his sermon was not more original or profound than sermons usually are, his language was correct and chaste, and his sentiments all that could be desired. The impression that he made was entirely satisfactory, save in so far as his fragile appearance and a suspicious cough suggested some physical unfitness for that rough bush-work which he was specially engaged to attend to. But, interesting as he was, he was of little consequence compared with his wife. When Mrs. Primrose was ushered into church by Mrs. Brown through the vestry door—in full view of the second largest congregation that had ever assembled within those walls—every eye was turned upon her, and she created an instant and all-pervading sensation, which survived throughout the service, and threw the new curate, sermon and all, into the shade.

She was a slim and girlish creature, with a charming, bright-eyed face—really a remarkably pretty young woman, as the dullest could see. But it was not her beauty that made her such a surprise and curiosity to these bush-folks; it was *her step and air—an air of distinction and repose,*

which was quite unaffected by the ordeal she was supposed to be passing through; and it was her dress, the cut and quality of which was such as to make every woman in the church look dowdy. It was not a rich dress, nor gay in colour, but even the men could dimly recognise its superiority to those that were brought in contact with it. The ladies saw it and felt it in a moment; the mint-stamp of the first-class London dressmaker was patent to their more instructed intelligence. And such a bonnet it was that crowned the perfect costume!—a little fluffy thing, made of no one knew what, but nestling to her graceful head as if it had grown there. If *this* was the curate's wife, she was an entirely new type (to Wooroona), and patently destined to make a mark of some sort upon the history of the parish. So the leading families instinctively surmised, and their instinct did not mislead them.

Mr. Mackenzie sat within arm's length of her, and the impression upon him was very strong. He was a man of the world, and he saw in her, if not a woman of the world—and she was overyoung to be that yet—at least one who knew that there was such a place, and something of its constitution and dimensions. This was a refreshing discovery. Her dress he did not take much notice

of—at any rate, he could not have described even so much as its colour had he been asked to do so; he felt it rather than saw it—inhaled its fine harmonies like a perfume, and wondered how the Miss Browns, seated one on either side of her, could make such guys of themselves. He was negatively conscious of the perfections of the young matron's costume by an entirely new perception of crude tastelessness in those of the girls, who were in the very van of fashion, as of modern culture generally, in this place, and whose style had hitherto rather pleased him than not. He did not study Mrs. Primrose in detail—he did not care how she or her garments were made up; he only judged by the result, which charmed him. He stood before her—his seat facing the east, while hers was on a line with the north wall—with grave eyes either on his book or abstractedly fixed upon the window over her head; but he bestowed upon her a concentrated and unswerving attention, which would have flattered her very much had she known of it. And if she did not know of it, she probably made a good guess, for it was the sort of thing she was accustomed to. Very modest and demure she looked, with her pretty eyes also bent upon her book, and her sweet little mouth, between the delicate but decided nose and the

equally delicate and decided chin, reverently composed; but, all the same, she was aware, the instant she entered the church, that there was at least one "presentable" man in the congregation, and she maintained an interest in him throughout the service, as he did in her. For his part, he neither knew nor cared how the lessons were read, nor what the sermon was about—Jack Primrose was superseded altogether as an object of curiosity and criticism; but, for her part, she was able to regard them both intelligently, and all else that went on around her. Considering the short time she had been in Wooroona, she reckoned up with tolerable accuracy the comforts and discomforts that were likely to attend her residence in that place; and in the first category she placed Colin Mackenzie, while still ignorant of his name, and in the second she placed Mrs. Brown, while her acquaintance with that lady was only ten minutes old.

Mrs. Primrose, though born to be an important person, was nobody to speak of from the social point of view. Her father was a medical man in an English county town, and she was the fourth of a family of children far too large to admit of any endowment of the daughters in the father's lifetime, over and above a comfortable trousseau and

a cheque for a few hundreds as a wedding present. In her case the wedding was so recent that the clothes she wore were a part of her outfit, still quite new and fresh; and the few hundreds intact, reserved for the buying of furniture when she and Jack should set up their house. They had not set up a house yet. The honeymoon, a series of farewell visits, and the voyage, had absorbed the few months of their married life. It was only now, in this Australian up-country township, that they were prepared to undertake the responsibilities of an establishment—to rent a cottage, engage a servant, and unpack their stock of plate and linen and the wedding gifts which had seemed so long unused; and they both looked forward with deep delight to the enjoyment of these matrimonial circumstances. They were a very happy young couple—happy, and hopeful, and content; but still they were a pair of whom a woman would say, “What made that man marry that girl?” and of whom one of the opposite sex would as naturally remark, “How could that girl marry that man?” There seemed no fitness in either to be the complement of the other, except that both were young, well-bred, and amiable.

Of course, it had happened quite naturally in the ordinary way. Though lovers had been fre-

quent in the doctor's household, lovers who could afford to have "intentions" had not. There was a Captain Drummond, of the militia, whose presence with the red-coats and the spring flowers had for several seasons (of six weeks each) made Mrs. Primrose's native town a paradise to her; and there was a dark-eyed Austrian count, whom she met when on a visit to a wealthy travelling aunt, and who followed her about the Continent with a persistence that could be attributed to only one cause; not to speak of Will Evelyn, son and heir of Sir William at the Hall, who used to gaze at her all service-time from his curtained pew in church, and hang about her at dances and tennis parties in a state of hopeless fascination. Each of these honestly devoted lovers, and many good fellows besides, would have snapped up Nancy Lawrence promptly had the pretty girl possessed anything of a fortune to match her face; and doubtless she would have been equally happy with any one of them—as she was with Jack Primrose now—and felt that no other husband in the world could compare with her husband. But as they were more or less in bonds, and as she had no money, she had been a too expensive luxury to them all. It was only a curate with nothing, like herself, and with the calm assurance of his class, who could dare to rush in

where they had feared to tread; and that is how money, or the want of money, settles the most important of our affairs in life. And that was how the Rev. John Primrose came by the wife that it was the fashion of his brother men to regard as far too good for him.

Nancy herself, with a very proper sense of her own value, never thought herself too good for him. Nor did her family and friends. His people were small squireens, held in much respect in her neighbourhood, and he himself was a clergyman—which doesn't mean much in this part of the world, but means a good deal to middle-class English girls. There were quite a number of healthy and handsome young ladies who would have accepted him with alacrity had they had the chance, though it was known that he had little or nothing beyond his professional income, and suspected that he would be sickly and die young, leaving a widow and orphans unprovided for; and Nancy felt it a great honour to be chosen before them all. She thought she had married him because she loved him—and she did love him as well as a girl of ghteen, who is necessarily a baby in that respect, new how; but she had really married him because he had asked to marry her, and because it is *oper for a girl to marry* when she is grown up

and has a large number of undowered sisters. She and they and the father and mother were all quite satisfied, except that Dr. Lawrence didn't feel quite easy about the bridegroom's health. But he did not believe there was anything radically wrong, and trusted to the Australian climate to correct what little there was. The doctor, though he practised in a country town, weighted with so large a family, was a man of research and enterprise, and knew what a fine field existed at the other end of the world for medical student sons. Nancy was not only to pursue her own advantage in her new sphere, she was to be pioneer for her brothers; and, when Jack's health was restored, she was to come back home, with her account of the great young country, to report whether it was fat or lean, like the men whom Moses commissioned to spy out the land of Canaan.

Looking at her, with his eyes on his prayer-book, and listening with a deaf mind to her husband's mild exposition of a mild text of Scripture from the pulpit over his head, Mr. Mackenzie began to ask himself the inevitable question, "How, I wonder, did she come to marry him?" But, of course, it was impossible for him to guess.

When service was over the leading families *showed no hurry* to leave the precincts of the

church. Church wardens and vestrymen felt it their duty to exchange a word with the arch-deacon upon parish matters, which were very pressing and interesting in these early days of his incumbency; likewise to extend the right hand of fellowship to the new curate, and to give him a sort of semi-official welcome. The wives waited for their husbands, aided and supported them, so that there was quite a crowd of gossips on the footpath between the vestry door and the parsonage garden gate, and several dinners threatening to spoil before they separated. This had happened every Sunday since the Browns' arrival; but Colin Mackenzie, though the leading parish-ioner of all, had never been one of the lingerers. He did not like a crowd, he did not like gossip; he shunned all church business except that of giving money; and—to the great regret of the arch-deacon—refused to undertake any responsibilities in the way of parochial administration. He was a man of peace, he said, and a long experience had shown him that there were no such quarrelsome people as church people when they attempted to work together on behalf of their church. His groom used to slip out before the last "Amen" had died away and put the horses to; and the parsonage ladies would hardly be able to get through the

vestry ere the waggonette had vanished in a cloud of dust up the Darriwell road. But on this occasion, though the horses were in and the servants seated in the carriage, the master was in no haste to start. He seemed to want to say "Good-morning" to Mrs. Brown, and to exchange a greeting with his old friend Jack. Jack, convoyed by the arch-deacon, was surrounded by a group of leading townsmen, portly and prosperous tradesmen, pillars of the local church, who monopolised him for the present; and Mrs. Brown was engaged in introducing Mrs. Primrose to those gentlemen's wives. It seemed hopeless to attempt to get at either without swamping himself, and meanwhile the Darriwell horses, unaccustomed to delay, were fretting themselves into a temper under the hot sun. Still he hung around, until Grace Brown saw him and thought he was waiting to speak to her, upon which she smilingly tripped across the grass and tenderly offered her hand to him.

"What did you think of the sermon?" she asked, as they stood together, apart from the rest.

Mr. Mackenzie was posed. He said he didn't know—he thought it was pretty much like other sermons.

"Not like papa's, of course," said Grace, "but

still very good—very good indeed. I like Mr. Primrose exceedingly.”

“He certainly has improved very much,” said Colin, with an absent air.

“And what do you think of *her*?” demanded Miss Brown. They were both gazing at the inch or two that was visible of the bride, who looked like a child among the solid matrons who hemmed her in.

Mr. Mackenzie was prompted again to say he didn’t know, but he held his tongue.

“I think she is *charming*,” said Grace, with energy.

Encouraged by which bold opinion, her companion intimated that he also thought her rather nice looking upon the whole.

“So English!” exclaimed Grace, fervently.

“Yes,” he responded; “she has an English look about her.”

“Such a perfect lady!”

“Yes; she is very ladylike.”

“You ought to stay and be introduced to her, knowing her husband as you do. How tiresome those people are, keeping us like this! I wish they would go. Oh!”—turning round suddenly—“what is the matter with your horses?”

There was a commotion in a distant part of the

church grounds. A farmer, whose spring-cart was used to stand beside the Darriwell carriage during service-time, had just harnessed up and was driving off; and the fiery pair that were accustomed to lead the way, under whose very noses he set forth with a jogging clatter over the grass, were so affronted by the circumstance that they could not contain their indignation. They first plunged wildly, then swerved violently to one side, then stood on their hind legs, and, coming down in a reckless manner, smashed the pole. A few women screamed, as if they had never witnessed such a thing before, and there was a general scamper towards the scene of the accident.

Colin quietly followed the crowd, along with other placid persons of his own sex. There was no harm done to speak of, in their eyes. The pole was snapped short off, and the carriage rendered useless until another could be put in; but that was nothing—the most trivial of mishaps. It could be left in the town for repairs, he said, and sent for next day; the servants could get a trap from the livery stables. As for him, he would walk home. An ordinary buggy would not hold them all, and a walk would do him good.

“Not in this weather,” urged Mrs. Brown, who had bustled upon the scene. “You must not think

of it. Stay to dinner with us, and the girls shall drive you back in the afternoon. Now *do*—it would really be no trouble to them whatever. Besides, then you can have a talk with Mr. Primrose. This is Mrs. Primrose.—Mrs. Primrose—Mr. Mackenzie. A neighbour of ours, my dear, and an old acquaintance of your husband's."

Mrs. Primrose looked at him, not with the ingratiating feminine ogle that he was accustomed to, but with the frank smile of a woman confident of being the equal of any man, and something more; and she held out her beautifully gloved hand.

"I hoped it was you," she said, "and I am so glad! We heard of your living here from a friend of Harry's—he wrote to us about it—but we did not know if you would be at church."

"Of course he would be at church. He is the most punctual of church-goers," said Mrs. Brown.

"Quite a model of respectability," said Colin, who thought that Harry, arguing from college habits, might have given him another character.

"An example to us all," murmured Mrs. Archdeacon, with unction. "Would that we had a few more churchmen of his stamp!"

He looked at Mrs. Primrose out of the corner

of his eye, and she met the look with a merry side-long smile, quickly repressed.

"I suppose churchmen are not always good at going to church," she replied to Mrs. Brown, evidently trying to be clerical, as a curate's wife should be. "But perhaps it's because, in this country, they live such a long way off."

"Distance is nothing when the heart is in it," said the oracle of Wooreona. "Nobody thinks of distance when there is a ball to go to."

"Are there many balls here?" Mrs. Primrose turned to Lottie, as the one from whom a sympathetic answer might be expected.

"Such as they are," responded Lottie, with aristocratic disdain. "Low things, of course. Are you fond of dancing?"

"Don't ask absurd questions," her mother interposed. "Mrs. Primrose has something better to think of than balls and dancing—haven't you, my dear? Come along to dinner.—Come, Mr. Mackenzie. Pot-luck, you know; you must take us as you find us."

So Mr. Mackenzie, when his servants and the townspeople had dispersed, sauntered into the parsonage garden with a Miss Brown on either side of him, studying the charming figure that walked in front as he went along. He was delighted to find

that she and Jack were to dine with the Browns as well as himself, and had anticipations of a pleasanter visit than usual — which were not disappointed.

There was no pot-luck about it, of course, but every evidence of special preparation having been made in order to impress the Primroses with the good style in which their clerical superiors lived. The festive turkey was there, and its corollary, the trifle, elaborately ornamented; jellies in glasses were dotted about the table, and flowers in unaccustomed profusion.

"Just a cold lunch," said Mrs. Brown, disparagingly, "which you'll excuse, as it is Sunday. We make a rule never to give the servants cooking to do on the day of rest."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Primrose, who declared she loved cold turkey and was desperately hungry; and she smiled sweetly at the archdeacon when, with much gallantry, he placed her in her seat beside him. Having said grace, with his eyes shut, the old gentleman proceeded to give her the best cuts from the breast and all the liver, and to pick over the salad-bowl for the tender hearts of the lettuces, which he piled on her plate in heaps, regardless of her laughing protests.

She sat at the right hand of the host, and Mr.

Mackenzie at the right hand of the hostess; but they talked together across the table, more and more independently of their neighbours, until they almost monopolised the conversation. Jack was not talkative—he had always been a shy, dull boy—and whatever he had to say was more or less of a professional nature, and addressed to the arch-deacon; but his wife had plenty to say for herself, and said it charmingly, and never once made reference to the church. She was delighted to meet in this land of strangers one who had known her Jack in childhood and their native town, who had been to Cambridge like any Englishman, and visited the same places on the Continent that she had visited, some of them at the same time; and the interest of these discoveries was so great to themselves, that they scarcely considered how the exclusion of their hostesses from the discussion reduced them to silence and unimportance such as they were not accustomed to at their own table. No allusion was made to topics proper to the day, and the young lady's subordinate position, until the meal was over. Then Mrs. Brown drew out her watch, and announced in a solemn manner that it was half-past two. Something in her voice recalled the curate's wife from her secular reminiscences to a sudden recognition of a present that

was in violent contrast with the past. She looked at Mrs. Brown expectantly. But her eyes still danced, and her assertive little nose had an air of assurance, like a banner in the wind.

"Of course, you will wish to see the Sunday-school," said Mrs. Brown. "School commences at three o'clock."

Nancy responded readily that she would like to see it very much.

"It may be as well to begin your duties there at once," continued the archdeaconess, with her most official air. "We have reserved a class for you."

At that Nancy turned and looked at her husband. It so happened that she had never yet taught in a Sunday-school, and had a great dread of the responsibilities involved in doing so. Jack, who was not dull where her wishes were concerned, answered the appeal promptly.

"Do as you like, dear," said he. "You needn't, of course, unless you wish."

It was very plucky of him, and a great relief to her. It also pleased Mr. Mackenzie mightily; he thought better of Jack Primrose than he had done yet. But Grace and Lottie stared in blank surprise, and their mother asked herself whether she had heard aright. This from a curate and a

curate's wife, whose business it was to teach in the Sunday-school, and to do anything else that they were bidden! It seemed to her that the time had now come when it was expedient to put her foot down.

"It is scarcely a matter of choice in the case of Mrs. Primrose," she said, with excessive dignity, combined with excessive affability. "In her position, of course, she will feel it right to teach in the Sunday-school, and help in the parish in every way she can. It is expected of her. I am sure the archdeacon agrees with me.—Don't you, archdeacon?"

"Oh, my dear, you and Mrs. Primrose must settle it between you," said that gentleman in a gay tone, rolling up his napkin hastily, with an evident intention to withdraw.

The situation stood revealed, and in a moment little Nancy grasped it. She was thought to be, and always declared that she was, the most amiable person in the world, and certainly she never put herself into a passion; but she had as fine a spirit as Mrs. Brown's, and was that lady's match in all respects. She, too, felt that it was expedient to put her foot down. The archdeacon's wife wanted her, Nancy Primrose, as a curate for herself, it appeared—which could on no account be permitted. But before she could speak, Mr. Mac-

kenzie delivered himself. The attempt to "put upon" this pretty little dainty creature enraged him (if she had been plain and commonplace, he probably would not have minded at all), and he felt an irrepressible impulse to protect her.

"It is a little too soon to begin yet, anyway," he said, bluntly; "she wants a rest first, and time to look about her."

"No," said Nancy, leaning back in her chair, "I am not in the least tired. I don't want to rest. And, of course, I always like to help people, whoever they may be, when I feel I can do them any good. And perhaps I shall teach in the Sunday-school—I wish to be useful. But I must say I object to have things *expected* of me that people have no right to expect. Why should they *expect* me to do this or that?"

"Because you are a clergyman's wife," said Mrs. Brown, severely; "and it is the duty of a clergyman's wife to help her husband."

"Of course it is. I quite agree with you. It is every wife's duty to help her husband. I shall help Jack all I can—especially as I am stronger than he is. But that's our own business—that's between him and me, and nobody else. It doesn't concern the parish the least little bit. The parish has no claim on me."

"You are very much mistaken, Mrs. Primrose."

"No," persisted Nancy, airily; "no more on me than on any other woman. Do they expect the doctor's wife to interfere with his patients, or the lawyer's wife with his law business?—though they may copy papers or dispense medicines, if they like and their husbands like. I call it an impertinence to assume that a clergyman's wife is not just as much her own mistress, subject only to her husband, as they are."

"It is not the same thing at all," the elder lady retorted, sharply; "not in this country, at any rate."

"Then what I say is, it ought to be, Mrs. Brown. And it will have to be, as far as I am concerned. People mustn't be truckled to. They mustn't be encouraged to be absurd and unreasonable, and—and impertinent. Do *you* say that the members of this congregation have any claim—any fair and just claim—on me?" demanded the young lady, suddenly flashing her bright eyes upon Colin Mackenzie?"

"Of course they haven't," he returned promptly.

"Of course they have," said Mrs. Brown, in the same breath.

"No," said the imperturbable Nancy; "Mr. Mackenzie is right—they haven't. Upon Jack

they have, of course, but not on me. *I* am not in orders; *I* am not paid—what is it, Jack?—two hundred and fifty pounds a year. If I were, I would earn it, of course. But the parish gives nothing to me, and therefore it has no right to any service from me.”

Mrs. Brown remarked that that was a very low view to take of spiritual things.

Mrs. Primrose begged her pardon, and maintained that the question under discussion was purely practical and a matter of ordinary fair-dealing. All she contended for was her just rights as a human being, which should be extended to clergymen's wives as to other women. She did not say that she wouldn't like to be good, and to make herself of use in the world, as far as she was able—of course she did not mean *that*.

“Well, I have no time to waste on these discussions,” said Mrs. Brown, rising with a stately gesture. “*I* must attend to *my* duties.—Mr. Primrose, I think the archdeacon will be waiting for you—the school bell will ring directly.—Grace and Lottie, I will see if I cannot manage your classes for you, my dears, while you drive Mr. Mackenzie to Darriwell—if he must go so soon—”

“No, no,” interrupted that gentleman; “I said I was going to walk, and I am going to walk. I

couldn't think of troubling the young ladies. Much obliged to you, all the same."

The young ladies tried to persuade him, but failed.

And so the Brown family all went to the Sunday-school, and no one was left at the parsonage except Mr. Mackenzie and Mrs. Primrose. The curate's wife was quite eager to accompany her hostesses (being anxious to avoid unpleasantness for her dear Jack's sake). She would like to see the school, she said, though she would not go back on her expressed opinion that she was not bound to associate herself with it officially unless she pleased; but now Mrs. Brown would not hear of taking her, of course. Oh, dear, no, there was no necessity whatever. She had no doubt that Grace and Lottie could manage to provide for the headless class. She begged Mrs. Primrose would amuse herself. As for Mr. Mackenzie, he seemed in a great hurry to set off to Darriwell, and bade good-bye to the ladies of the house at the school gate in a manner which implied that he was already on his way thither; but he remembered that he had not asked Mrs. Primrose at what time it would be convenient to call on her, and went back and stayed nearly an hour longer — stayed, in short, until the Sunday scholars began to reappear.

He and Nancy chatted under the veranda and enjoyed each other's company very much. They talked about Jack's boyhood, about Harry, and the other Primrose brothers and sisters; about the still more numerous and not less interesting Lawrence family; about Switzerland and the Riviera, Paris, and Rome, and many other places and things. Colin was refreshed by these reminiscences of youth and travel, shared by such an intelligent and sympathetic little person; and Nancy really did amuse herself, as Mrs. Brown had desired.

The time passed swiftly for them both, and school seemed to be over almost before it had well begun. But ere it was quite over Mr. Mackenzie had taken his final departure, and Mrs. Primrose was sauntering round the garden by herself, under her parasol, thanking Goodness that she had not consented to make her headquarters at the parsonage, and at the same time thinking how she could smooth the ruffled feathers of the formidable archdeacon's wife—on account of Jack. For herself she had no fear of anybody, but her poor dear boy must, of course, be considered.

So she was all smiles when the family and her husband returned, and made herself as amiable as possible—which was very much so indeed—to

everybody. But somehow she gradually concentrated herself and her charms, not upon Mrs. Brown, but upon the archdeacon, who had now an hour or two of leisure wherein to relax and refresh himself, and who had a mundane partiality for what is called "the sex" when represented in an attractive person. It was very natural. She was not a coquette, or at least not particularly so, but if she had the choice between the company of a man and that of a woman, all other things being equal, she was as certain to choose the former as the former was to choose her. She always had done so, and always would, to the end of the chapter. She did not reason about it; it was instinct—a perfectly innocent and healthy instinct, too—which she obeyed more or less unconsciously as a matter of course. Wherefore, while the Reverend John and the ladies Brown discussed modern unbelief, the Salvation Army, and other burning questions, in the drawing-room, the portly head of the house and his girlish guest took a protracted stroll about the parsonage grounds, inspected the chickens and the pig, looked into the dairy and schoolhouse, and made the dog jump over sticks, and otherwise entertained themselves in a trivial and pleasing manner. They did not reappear until the bell rang for tea, to which meal

the archdeacon brought a rubicund and animated visage, and Mrs. Primrose a breast-knot of rose-buds which he had gathered for her.

They were laughing when they came in, but they soon left off that. Mrs. Brown, presumably overwrought by a single-handed struggle with two Sunday-school classes, her own and the one that Mrs. Primrose had thrown upon her hands, complained of a headache; and that headache threw a gloom over the tea-table and the spirits of the whole party. It filled her family with sympathetic solicitude, though it did not appear to alarm them very much. They took the teapot from her hands, fetched her a smelling-bottle, advised her to lie down in the evening instead of going to church, and otherwise endeavoured to console her; but their efforts were unsuccessful, which did not seem to surprise them. Nancy altogether disbelieved in the headache. She said to herself that Mrs. Brown was suffering from an attack of temper, and nothing more nor less, and that she was a disagreeable old person, and would undoubtedly require a great deal of management; and the young lady began to feel bored, and to sigh for the Black Swan and liberty. She put her handkerchief to her lips and yawned.

"Jack," she whispered, as they left the table,

"*don't* say you will come back here after evening church."

And, of course, Jack didn't, for he loved to do as she told him. He said, when service was over, and the archdeacon hospitably pressed them to come in and "have something," that Mrs. Primrose was tired and wanted to get to bed; and Nancy, having been consoled with and bidden take care of herself, shook hands with the old fellow, and not less sweetly with his wife and daughters, and skipped away in the moonlight with a light heart and step.

She did not go to bed for hours. No; they found Colin Mackenzie at the Black Swan (he had been detained about the waggonette, he said), and he first gave them his company in their sitting-room, and then they gave him theirs on his road home to Darriwell. It was a still and shining summer night, and the walk was delicious. The cool, clear, delicate air was like wine to Nancy's spirits, which had been under an unaccustomed restraint, and she chatted as she went along at such a rate that the men could hardly get a word in. She was in a reckless mood, as people are when they are slightly intoxicated, and she didn't care what she said. She "passed remarks" upon all she had seen and heard since her arrival at

Wooroona as freely as if there had been no third person a stranger to her and a resident of the place, to hear her. She was particularly free in her criticism of her late hostess, who might have been his aunt for all she knew.

"I know her," said she, with the self-confidence of youth; "I know her now just as well as I shall do twelve months hence. She is an old cat—that's what she is. But I'm not going to let her spit and scratch at me; no, I must show her from the first that that is not to be permitted. She will never respect me if I do not respect myself, and there is nothing like beginning as you mean to go on."

"It wouldn't be wise to quarrel with her, Nancy," the Reverend John remarked, in a gentle but rather anxious tone.

"My dear boy—quarrel! *Do* I ever quarrel?"

"Wouldn't you rather put up with a little—for the short time we may have to stay here—than risk the consequences of making enemies of people who have the power to make or mar our prospects—"

"Wouldn't I rather we were trucklers and time-servers?" she retorted, interrupting him. "No; it is the greatest mistake in the world to put up with things for fear of consequences—the most unprofitable in every way. Let us not be pusil-



lanimous, Jacky, whatever we are; we should live to repent it, I assure you. A stitch in time saves nine. If Mrs. Brown is nipped in the bud at once, it will save us a world of discomfort in the long run. I am sure Mr. Mackenzie agrees with me, though he will not say so."

Mr. Mackenzie intimated that he was quite willing to say so if she wished it. But it seemed to him that she was perfectly well able to dispense with his support. He thought she would manage beautifully if she were let alone.

"Yes; I think so too," she modestly agreed. "I think you may trust me, Jack—though I say it that shouldn't. I shall take every care of *you*, you may be sure. I shall not drag you into it. And the more she hates me, if she will hate me—of course, I shall not encourage her to do so—the less likely is she to be nasty to you. She will not blame you on my account; she will pity you."

"I don't want any separate indulgence," said Jack. "You and I are one. It is only for your sake that I think anything about it."

"Then make your mind easy. Don't be afraid for me. I sha'n't be hurt—or, if I am, I'd rather be hurt than give in to her and despise myself," said Nancy, marching along the dusty road with the step of a young queen. "I'll be very careful—

I'll be as prudent as possible—I can even be magnanimous, if necessary; but"—with a lifting of her little head—"I am not going to let her interfere with any of my privileges as a free woman. No, indeed; I'll see her further first."

At that selfsame hour, Mrs. Brown, who had gone to bed with a vinegar bandage on her brow, was talking to the archdeacon while he made his toilet for the night.

"That Mrs. Primrose is a little minx," she said, "and will have to be taught her place. And I trust you are going to assist me, Josiah, and not stand by and see me insulted in my own house, before my own children, by my own curate's wife, again, as I was to-day."

CHAPTER III.

THUS did these two uncongenial spirits discover their mutual antipathy ere a day was over. And the intelligent reader will not need to be told that a week was quite long enough to develop incipient hostility into acknowledged war.

During that first week Mrs. Primrose had a sort of social ovation. Her surprising air of distinction, her still more surprising fashion of dressing herself, and the fact that Mr. Mackenzie, of Darriwell, called upon her on Monday, and was reported to be connected with her in some way, combined to lift her entirely out of the position that had been tacitly assigned to her and to give her an instant popularity. "Everybody" called. The leading families tripped each other up in the lobby of the Black Swan in their haste to be the first, or as near the first as possible, to offer her countenance and attention; and whereas the gentlemen, according to immemorial custom, had been represented by their cards at the parsonage on a

recent similar occasion, they now showed an almost unanimous disposition to sacrifice themselves and accompany their womenkind in person. Mr. Hardcastle, the police magistrate, in tall hat and blue frock-coat, escorted his wife and daughters; and Dr. Lloyd Mrs. Lloyd; and Dr. Debenham his sister, Miss Debenham. The more important shopkeepers were not behindhand; and the mayor himself, an extensive miller and farmer, owning a fine house on the outskirts of the town—a mayor who set the highest value upon his civic rank and personal and pecuniary worth—did not disdain to honour the curate's wife in a similar manner. Mr. Arnold, the married lawyer, did not go with Mrs. Arnold, but he followed her; and the bank managers and the postmaster paid their respects also in course of time. None of them let the week run out, and most of them went on Tuesday and Wednesday, during several hours of which days Nancy's little sitting-room was crowded to its utmost capacity. She appeared delighted to see them all, one just as much as another. She was neither shy and formal, nor bold and presuming, but smiled and chatted with a bright and cheerful self-possession and air of enjoyment that captivated everybody—and especially her male guests. She was young and pretty, she was beautifully

dressed, she was accustomed to society and to being made much of therein; well might she be charming! It was no credit to her. But of course she got the credit of it—just as a plain woman, who has never known admiration and success, gets the blame of being awkward and dull, though she cannot help it. “A sweet, amiable, unaffected little thing, and a perfect lady, every inch of her,” said the husbands and fathers, when speaking of Mrs. Primrose afterwards in the bosom of their families; and the wives and daughters, temperately, and with a few slight qualifications, agreed that she was so.

And she was treated accordingly. Invitations flowed in, offers of assistance, gifts of fruit and flowers; all the hospitality for which the country is famous was lavished upon her, and upon her husband for her sake. Mr. Arnold took her for a drive on Wednesday evening, to show her the country; Dr. Lloyd took her for another on Thursday, for the same purpose; Mr. Hardcastle fetched her on Friday to play tennis with his daughters and a few select gentlemen of the town; and a picnic to the waterfall, which was the lion of the district, was organised for Saturday in her honour. By the time that Sunday came round again, she knew, and was known by, every person of conse-

quence in Wooroona and the neighbourhood, and was the heroine and favourite of the hour.

All this was gall and wormwood to Mrs. Brown. Only a few weeks back *she* had been the popular idol, for whom nobody could do enough; only the other day *her* girls had been the admired ones, whose praises were on every man's tongue and in every man's eye! And now to have this impudent little minx, this mere curate's wife, thrusting herself forward and arrogating all the attention to herself—it was too revolting! Still, the injured woman tried to bear it—knowing how much it was to her interest to do so—without betraying what she suffered more openly than she could help; and she was tolerably successful for a little while. Mrs. Primrose received her callers and made her new acquaintances without that support and assistance which she (Mrs. Brown) had been prepared to render, and pursued a consistent course of disrespectful independence calculated to demoralise the parish and to bring the office of archdeacon into contempt; and Mrs. Brown said nothing. At least, she said nothing to the arch-offender, and not much to the meek accomplice; it will be understood that she spoke her mind to her spouse in those hours when he had no option but to listen to her, and that freely. If she had not

thus relieved herself, she would have given way somewhere in a wrong place very early in the week. But she bore up until Saturday. She had her dignity to think of, and likewise her dear children. Since Mrs. Primrose might be useful to Grace, the mother would endure her own wrongs uncomplainingly. So she determined and endeavoured. But the flesh was weak, and she could not do it. She was not accustomed to self-abnegation, and was too old to begin the practice of it now. On Saturday she broke out.

It was early in the day. Mr. Primrose went to the parsonage to consult the archdeacon upon Sunday business, and asked his wife to go with him. "The ladies are always inquiring after you," he said, "and I'm afraid they feel a little neglected."

"I'm sure I don't see why they should," replied Nancy. "They have only been to see me once, and I have been there three times, at least."

But she put on her hat and gloves, and accompanied him readily. She was in high spirits, anticipating the delights of the coming picnic, for which she had prepared; and her fair and sunny face, and her little figure, trimly belted into the neatest and freshest of cotton frocks, looked bonnier than ever.

"I cannot stay long," she said, after greeting Mrs. Brown, whom she found alone, in her offensively easy and airy manner. "The Hardcastles and a few of their friends are going to take me to see the falls, and are to fetch me from the Black Swan at eleven. I must not keep them waiting."

"What—out again!" exclaimed Mrs. Brown, lifting her eyebrows and smiling unpleasantly. It was, indeed, a smile turned sour, curdled with the venom of maternal jealousy—for the Hardcastles had not asked Grace and Lottie to join their party. "Out *again*!" she repeated, almost with a snort.

"Why not?" inquired Nancy, scenting battle. "Can one do better than be out in such lovely weather?"

"Yes, one can," was the prompt rejoinder. "One can think of one's duty before one's pleasure, *sometimes*."

"My husband likes me to go—though, unfortunately, he can't go with me," said Nancy. "I think I am doing my duty when I am doing what he wishes."

"It doesn't follow that, because he is your husband, he is the wisest man in the world, does it?" said Mrs. Brown, pretending—and it was, indeed, a most transparent pretence—to be playful.

"No," said Mrs. Primrose, "by no means. He

doesn't presume to be wiser than other people. I am happy to say he doesn't set up for a pope, as so many young clergymen do. If he had been one of that sort, he wouldn't have had me. Dear old Jack! I don't want to see him any different from what he is—except stouter and stronger."

"He looks dreadfully delicate," said Mrs. Brown. "But I suspect he is one of those unselfish people who would rather work themselves to death than let any one help them—unless the help is volunteered and given willingly."

"Oh, now I see what you mean," said Nancy, with cheerful candour; "you think I ought to stay and help Jack, instead of going to the picnic? But he has only a funeral at three, and his sermons to get ready for to-morrow. I'm afraid I should be more hindrance than help to him at either of those employments."

"He has visiting to do, and you ought to visit with him and make yourself acquainted with the people."

There was an unvarnished rudeness in the tone and purport of this speech which acted upon Nancy's temper. It had lain quiescent, but uneasy, like a dog teased with flies, but now, goaded to sudden impatience, sprang up to bark and bite.

"Mrs. Brown," she said, emphatically, "you

may remember I told you on Sunday that I recognised no authority on the part of this parish, or any one in it, to dictate to me. My own husband is the only person with the faintest shadow of a right to question or control my conduct, and he does not wish me to do those things—not as a general rule and a matter of course. He doesn't believe in women putting themselves forward and interfering in men's business; and especially he doesn't believe in their being hustled here and there and made common use of, as if they were public property. He agrees with me. A clergyman's domestic life and all belonging to it is as entirely apart from his professional life as that of a lawyer or a doctor, and as sacred from outside interference. It is just because the clergy forget this, and let themselves be led by the nose and mixed up with women in everything, that they are so little respected," proceeded Nancy, with an explanatory and impartial air. "They have become half women themselves, and that is why the laity sit on them and despise them."

Then she went away, saying her time was up, leaving Mrs. Brown stunned and speechless.

Of course, they patched up a peace—a sort of peace. Mrs. Brown, when her rage was expended (at about one o'clock A. M. on the following day),

was induced to admit in her heart—though she would have died sooner than do so with her tongue—that the archdeacon was right in his opinion that there was no ground for appealing to the bishop; and Mrs. Primrose, when she went off for her picnic, with a proud carriage of the head and a sense of satisfaction pervading her whole being, prudently resolved that she would not make Jack uneasy by telling him what had happened, and that she would do what in her lay to mitigate the inevitable consequences. She would conciliate the “old cat” as far as was consistent with dignity, and not make a vulgar quarrel of it until she was obliged.

In pursuance of this virtuous intention, she said she would go to the Sunday-school and teach that class which had been set apart for her, if Jack would be good enough to tell her how. The two were having their lunch at the Black Swan after morning church (not having been invited to the parsonage to-day), and the curate was to start at three o'clock on a long journey to take an evening service in the bush. He could not, therefore, give her his support in her undertaking, but he said he would take her to the school before he left, and introduce her, and “put her in the way of it;” and he was much gratified by the expression of her

wish to give the services that he would not have asked for against her will. So, when their meal was ended, he instructed her in the general rules and customs of Sunday-schools, and gave her an outline of the subjects she would be required to expound; and then they set off to the schoolhouse together.

The bell had not begun to ring, and there were more children outside the building than in it; very few teachers had arrived, and none from the parsonage; but the business of the afternoon was being prepared for by the superintendent, Mr. Prendergast, a humble government official, who was a very good young man. To him John Primrose advanced, as he was sorting the class-books on his desk; and Nancy, recognising a friend (which is to say, an admirer), began immediately to feel at ease.

"Oh, Prendergast," said Jack, shaking hands, "I've brought Mrs. Primrose to help you. Though she's a parson's wife, she hasn't been used to teaching in Sunday-school, but she thinks she'd like to try. It's only to be an experiment; she is not to go on with it if she doesn't like it. I always let her please herself in those things."

Mr. Prendergast acquiesced readily and cordially. He was a good young man, with the or-

thodox parochial ideas, but to him also Mrs. Primrose was Mrs. Primrose, and not to be confounded with the every-day curate's wife. "Of course, of course," he said. "It is only too good of her to think of helping us.—I am afraid you'll find the place very hot and uncomfortable, Mrs. Primrose. It has an iron roof, you see, and no ceiling under it; but I must try to find you a shady corner, if I can."

He looked round the room anxiously. The Reverend John looked at his watch.

"I'm afraid I must be running off," said ~~the~~ latter.—"Do you mind if I leave you, Nancy, dear? You'll be all right with Prendergast.—You'll take care of her, Prendergast, won't you?"

"Certainly," replied the superintendent, with fervour. "I'll take every care of her. She will be quite safe with me." As if Nancy were a helpless baby that couldn't run alone.—"Sit down, Mrs. Primrose; don't tire yourself standing."

He placed his own official chair, the only one in the room, which was furnished for ordinary mortals with benches and stools, for her to sit on, and then stood before her like a courtier before a queen to ask her what she would like best to do.

"Mrs. Brown said you had arranged a class for me," said Nancy, drawing a little Spanish fan, on

which was pictured a bull-fight, from her pocket and fanning her sun-flushed face.

"Oh, yes," returned the young man, indifferently; "she did suggest the second girls—Miss Charlotte has been teaching them. But perhaps you would not care for a class of that kind? They are big girls in their teens—some of them are out in service. You would find them rather a handful, I fancy."

"Pray don't give me big girls!" cried Nancy. "Don't give me girls at all; give me boys. I *love* boys. Let me have some nice little curly-headed scamps, the real bad little boys, you know—the little pickles that you can't manage. *I* can manage them. Boys always do what *I* tell them," said Nancy, complacently.

"It seems to me they must be queer boys if they don't," said Mr. Prendergast, with irrepressible feeling; and Nancy laughed, and they became very good friends.

"If you like boys best, boys you shall have," said the superintendent, with an air of determination; and presently, as the bell began to ring and the room to fill with children and teachers, he went round and pulled all the existing arrangements to pieces in order to make that one which Nancy desired. The second girls were left to

Miss Charlotte, and half a dozen other teachers were summarily transposed; so that, when Mrs. Brown entered, Nancy was comfortably settled in the shadiest corner, seated upon the only chair, and surrounded by a picked dozen of nice little boys, varying from nine to twelve years of age, "doing her duty" with exemplary conscientiousness, and finding considerable enjoyment therein.

Mrs. Brown was accustomed to come into school, as into church, at the very last moment, accompanying her archdeacon—a symbolical procedure—when all was ready and awaiting them. She did so on this occasion, and consequently lost an opportunity that would have been very valuable to her. The bell had ceased, her daughter Grace had seated herself at the small harmonium, the roll was being called, and she sailed to her seat at the head of the first class without noticing that her enemy was present. But, ere she had been seated two minutes, her eagle eye, scanning the whole assembly, lit upon the distractingly pretty little figure of the curate's wife, upon the newly formed class, upon the position of the superintendent's chair—a chair which had never been moved from the rostrum for *her* accommodation—and she could hardly contain herself. With difficulty she sat until the last name was shouted

and answered to, her nostrils dilating and her bosom heaving with impatience; then she jumped to her feet and marched back to the superintendent's desk.

"You have put Mrs. Primrose in the wrong place, Mr. Prendergast," she said, loudly. "The second girls' class is to be hers."

"I know," said the young man, apologetically; "but Mrs. Primrose preferred boys."

"It's all right, my dear," said the archdeacon, with a soothing motion of the hand; "she likes boys best."

"What has that to do with it?" Mrs. Brown imperiously demanded, forgetting for the moment where she was, in her rage with two such weak and foolish men. "We are not here to pick and choose. We can't have the school upset every time a new teacher comes into it, just because—"

"Silence, children!" thundered the archdeacon, though the children happened to be unusually quiet at the time; "no noise, if you please!" And he opened a little orange-backed hymn-book and held it ostentatiously before him. "It's all right, Maria—Mr. Prendergast has settled it very well.—Ahem! The forty—*first*—HYMN!"

Grace began to play the tune upon her little instrument, the air was filled with the rustle of

leaves of hymn-books hastily turned over by hundreds of little hands, and there was nothing for Mrs. Brown to do but to accept the situation—to walk back to her class in silent majesty and open her hymn-book too.

Nancy, watching from her corner, had not heard what was said, but she noted the expression on the face of the “old cat,” and drew her own conclusions. “I suppose this isn’t right either,” she said to herself, wrinkling her charming nose. “I know I shall never be able to please her, do what I will.”

But Mrs. Brown’s mortification at this moment was chiefly due to the cruel circumstance that her own husband, her own archdeacon, had publicly insulted her.

However, she could do nothing to help herself just now, though she fully intended to vindicate her dignity and powers presently, and the business of the school proceeded. The archdeacon, though he usually left it to Mr. Prendergast, gave out the hymn himself, thus covering his retreat from a possibly untimely onslaught. He cleared his throat, and shouted it slowly, verse by verse :

“Nothing, either great or small,
Remains for me to do ;
Jesus died, and paid it all,
Long, long ago.

Chorus—Jesus paid it all,
Long, long ago;
And nothing, either great or small,
Remains for me to do."

When the hymn was over, a prayer followed, and then the lessons began. The superintendent sidled round to Nancy's corner to see if he could give her any assistance, and to rap the head of any little imp who should dare to be troublesome to her. He found her rereading the hymn that had just been sung, with a curious smile on her face.

"I say," she remarked, with all the assurance of a rival potentate, "if I've got to teach in this school I'm not going to teach *this* sort of thing;" and she quoted a few stanzas in a distinct tone that could be heard some distance off :

"'Doing' is a deadly thing;
'Doing' ends in death.
Cast your deadly 'doing' down,
Down at Jesus' feet;
Stand in Him, in Him alone,
Gloriously complete.'

Now, of all the immoral doctrines that ever I heard of—!"

"But you know what it means," Mr. Prendergast urged, with a blush. "It is but 'Nothing in my hand I bring,' in other words."

She looked at him with her pretty, provocative

eyes, and then at the boys, who were staring at her, open-mouthed.—“Now, see here, you little brats,” she proceeded, with sudden gravity, “just you remember this: If you don’t *do* all you can, and be *doing* all day long, you’ll be horrid, idle, good-for-nothing boys; and when you grow up to be men they’ll put you in prison, and perhaps hang you. I don’t know *what* awful things wouldn’t happen to you! Never mind what the hymn-book says—you mind what I say.”

Mr. Prendergast was very much disconcerted, but collected himself by the time she had finished this little speech.

“O, Mrs. Primrose,” he pleaded, under his breath, “you mustn’t talk to them like that. You mustn’t teach them to question authority—at their age, too—you mustn’t, really. It would never do.”

“Well, you shouldn’t mislead them,” she replied, calmly. “If they come to the Sunday-school to be taught religion, they shouldn’t have such nonsense as that put into their heads. They’d far better stay away, and have a good game out of doors.”

With anybody else Mr. Prendergast would have been seriously angry, for he was proud and jealous of his school, and its system, and all belonging to it; but with Mrs. Primrose no man could be

angry. He took the hymn-book, and turned the leaves over and over, smiling in spite of himself, as he felt her eyes upon him.

"I must say," he admitted, "that I never cared for this collection; but it has been used here for many years, I believe, and I have found it in other schools—good schools, too—"

He paused and looked towards the archdeacon, who happened by a strange coincidence to be looking their way. The look, though it said nothing, was sufficient to bring that venerable person trotting to the shady corner; and Mrs. Brown presently saw the three seated in a group, the archdeacon on one form, the superintendent on another, the curate's wife between them, all talking earnestly together, apparently oblivious of the presence, and even the existence, of the dozen little boys. The time for lessons was being wasted on a discussion of the hymn-book, which, as an established institution, no one had presumed to discuss before. Nancy was saying that, if she were in their (the men's) place, she would be ashamed to have such a thing in the school; and they were listening to her apologetically, and admitting to each other that perhaps she was right, and that it might be as well to make a change. And they were also asking her what selection she would rec-

commend, though they had been familiar with Sunday-schools all their lives, and she had scarcely entered one before.

Thus did she commence her work of conciliation. And she went on as she began. Mr. Prendergast, when the hymn-book subject was closed, and she meekly asked him what she was to do, bade her hear the class their catechism. She opened her prayer-book accordingly, ranged the little fellows—all of whom had the impression that school was a sort of game of play to-day—around her, and made them repeat the time-honoured formula, while she endeavoured to explain its meaning as they went along, as Jack had instructed her to do.

"Now, you know," Mrs. Brown heard her say (catching the sense from a scattered word or two), when the "duty towards thy neighbour" was being dealt with, "this catechism was written a good many years ago, when people were not all free men as they are now. You don't have any 'betters' in these days, and 'lowly' isn't quite the word to use. No; you are just to be honest and kind, and not mean and selfish—do you see?—and no persons are your betters just because they are richer and higher up in the world than you, unless they have become so by being more industrious. They

are not better at all. But you know that, you Australian boys; your fathers have told you all about that. It is only the good people who are better than the bad people, that's all. And to do your duty in the state of life to which it has pleased God to call you—that is all very well, of course; but you must try to get into other states of life—to work hard, and learn everything, and keep always trying and pushing on, and not be too contented. Contentment is a very bad thing sometimes; it means laziness and stupidity, and laziness is the worst sin that little boys can be guilty of, or very nearly the worst.”

By-and-by the archdeacon strayed round to the shady corner, interested to see the young teacher's head bent down, and her pupils all clustered round her lap, listening to something she was telling them with rapt attention. He peeped over her shoulder, and saw her Spanish fan spread out upon her knee. He inclined his ear, and discovered that she was giving the little boys a graphic and blood-curdling description of the bull-fight thereon depicted.

“Well,” he said, feeling that he ought to remonstrate, but not finding it in his heart to do so, “how are you getting on?”

“Oh, very well, thank you,” she replied, sweet-

ly. "They have done their catechism, so I am just telling them a little story."

"I hope they have not been troublesome"—frowning at the little boys, who did not attempt to conceal their disgust at the interruption.

"Not at all. They are as good as gold." And she patted the nearest curly head with her pretty hand.

"That's right," said the archdeacon; and he passed on to speak to his wife, who had peremptorily beckoned him.

"Josiah," said Mrs. Brown, "I must insist on Mrs. Primrose being made to teach those children properly. You have no idea how she has been going on. It is perfectly shocking!"

"Oh, my dear," said the archdeacon, apologetically, "she is new to it yet. She hasn't got into the way of it. Prendergast will tell her. He's a very good superintendent, and we ought not to take those things out of his hands."

"Mr. Prendergast is an idiot," said Mrs. Brown, "and," she added (she tried to restrain herself, but could not), "so are you. I shall talk to Mr. Primrose about her."

Josiah stole away, and soon after the signal was given for closing the school. The marks were set down, the tickets and cards distributed, and

other matters of routine attended to. Grace returned to the harmonium, and the last hymn was given out :

“ Standing by a purpose true,
Heeding God’s command,
Honour them, the faithful few !
All hail to Daniel’s Band !

Chorus—“ Dare to be a Daniel !
Dare to stand alone !
Dare to have a purpose firm !
Dare to make it known !”

This was a favourite of the hymns in the little orange-covered book, and Nancy had no fault to find with the doctrine this time. But from a literary point of view there seemed something funny about it—she was a little person too prone to find a funny side to things, especially when her position in life was considered. She had a sweet and clear soprano voice, and she joined in the swinging cadence vigorously; but her eyes laughed at the superintendent as she did so :

“ Many giants, great and tall,
Stalking through the land,
Headlong to the earth would fall
If met by Daniel’s Band !”

This was one of the verses, and when she was half-way through it she had to stop, and put her handkerchief to her mouth, and clear her throat.

The superintendent, chancing to observe her at this juncture, grew red, and had recourse to a handkerchief also. It was a fact that he had never seen any absurdity in that or any other hymn in the whole course of his life, until now but now he did see it. And Mrs. Brown saw him blush, and blow his nose to hide the unprecedented and unseemly smile. He might hide it from the scholars, but not from her.

She communicated her impressions to the archdeacon some half-dozen hours later.

"If there is one thing more than another that makes me *sick*," she remarked, "it is to see married women ogling young men. It is bad enough when girls do it—thank Goodness, *our* dear children don't know the A-B-C of such practices! I trust in Heaven they never will—they shall not, if I can prevent it. Ah, poor Mr. Primrose! I'm sorry for him. It's a pity the bishops don't exercise some authority over those young men in matters of that kind; it would be all the better for them, and for the Church at large. They should either not be allowed to marry until they attain years of discretion, or it should be insisted that they make a proper choice, and not bring scandal on the cloth, as they do now."

The archdeacon, in his shirt-sleeves, with his

sacerdotal waistcoat unbuttoned, was winding his watch at the dressing-table. He listened to his wife in silence until this operation was concluded, and then mildly asked her what she was talking about.

"What am I talking about?" she repeated, with quick anger, as if he had prodded her with a pin. "You know very well what I am talking about—that little vulgar minx, Mrs. Primrose, and her goings on this afternoon—making eyes at Mr. Prendergast right across the room—after flirting with him the whole of school-time. A pretty example for the children, truly! I never was more shocked and disgusted in my life."

The archdeacon had known all along what she meant, and so was not agitated by this explanation. He said *he* didn't think Mrs. Primrose was vulgar.

"No, I dare say not—I dare say not," retorted Mrs. Brown, with scorn. "Your tastes and mine are very different, Josiah, in many things. *I* like to see a woman and a clergyman's wife modest and gentle and well-bred; *I* like to see her thinking of her duty and her husband, and devoting herself to *them*."

"So do I," returned the archdeacon, with evident sincerity. "You and I are perfectly agreed, so far as that goes, Maria."

"Then why do you encourage her to be so bold and impudent? You—a man of your age, and a father of grown-up children—why do you let her behave so, and do nothing to check her?"

"My dear, it is not my business—"

"Not *your* business—and you an archdeacon, and she the wife of your own curate?"

"And, even if it were, I see nothing wrong with her behaviour. She is just young and light-hearted, and she hasn't been used to our ways—that's all. As to making eyes—you shouldn't say such things, Maria; you shouldn't, indeed. Her eyes are bright and merry, and—and so on; she can't help that. There's no impudence, as you call it, either in them or her. She's as simple and innocent as a child."

"Simple and innocent!" echoed Maria, with one of her curdled smiles. "I'll take care she doesn't contaminate *my* children with her simplicity and innocence, and so I tell you plainly, Josiah. Oh, what blind bats you men are! *She* knows how to manage you, simple and innocent as she is. Simple and innocent, indeed!" and the curdled smile fermented into a laugh.

The archdeacon began to grow nervous and anxious.

"Now, now, really, Maria," he stammered, ear-

nestly, "I am sure you don't know what you are saying. You are just put out with her for some reason or another—you've got a grudge against her—"

"I beg your pardon—not at all," she interrupted. "Pray don't run away with that idea. She has grossly insulted me, but that I don't take the least notice of. I am only thinking of my children, whom I have striven so hard to bring up well; and I tell you I will not have them exposed to evil influences. Other mothers will feel as I do. I'm sure, if Mrs. Hardcastle knew what she was—"

"My good woman, don't be so absurd," said the archdeacon, who had been grave, but now laughed irrepressibly. "Hetty Hardcastle is old enough to be Mrs. Primrose's mother; and as for Grace and Lottie, why, *they* must have been pretty big children when she was born. It isn't likely they'll any of them go to school to her, at this time of day. And"—taking courage from the sound of his own voice—"I should have thought that you, Maria, being a mother yourself, would have been glad to be kind to her—so far away from everybody belonging to her as she is."

There never was a female yet who liked to be addressed as "good woman," and Mrs. Brown

resented this designation fiercely. The fingers with which she buttoned her night-gown trembled, her bosom heaved, her eyes flashed with rage. She had now completed her toilet for the night, and was about to say her prayers.

"I *have* tried to be kind to her," she vehemently protested, "but she won't let me. She delights in flinging my kindness back in my face. I am not going to put myself out for her—to make myself cheap to a person of that sort—any longer."

"Well, at least, you need not try to injure her. Now, do promise, Maria, not to go saying things about her to Mrs. Hardcastle and the people of the parish—do, as a favour to me."

"I shall say what I think right, Josiah. I shall do what I believe to be my duty; and I shall tell the truth, as I have always done," said Mrs. Brown.

And then she knelt down at her bedside and became absorbed in her devotions.

CHAPTER IV.


As soon as might be after the installation of the archdeacon at Wooroona, every little township and hamlet in the district—every little centre of population that could boast a building wherein divine service was held, though it were but once a quarter—had a tea-meeting in his honour. There were thus some fifteen tea-meetings celebrated in the course of the first three months, at all of which the venerable Josiah ate cold turkey and trifle, and made speeches thereafter that were most attentively listened to and reported with editorial approbation in the local papers. There was a great sameness in the speeches, as in the dishes; but that was inevitable, and created no disappointment. Sameness—indeed, the close adherence to immemorial tradition—was an indispensable condition of success. The archdeacon knew what was expected of him, and delivered himself accordingly. Mrs. Brown and her daughters also knew what was expected of them; and they, too, “did

their duty," as the former would have expressed it—pouring profuse smiles and compliments upon their hosts and hostesses, and professing an ardent interest in their several families and affairs. So that each tea-meeting "passed off" more harmoniously than the last.

When Mr. and Mrs. Primrose were added to the parish, two-thirds of the series had been celebrated; there were but four or five to be worked through (before a second series was started, of which symptoms were already beginning to appear); and the first of these occurred before the young people were established in their house, and about a week after Mrs. Brown had confided to Mrs. Hardcastle her grief and anxiety in that the new curate's wife was not only an irreligious person, with no respect whatever for sacred things, but a woman whose "moral tone" was such as to render her an undesirable companion for well-brought-up girls.

By this time the charm of novelty had worn off Mrs. Primrose, and the ladies of the parish were ready to feel grateful for being put upon their guard against her. They had grown accustomed to her pretty face and her pretty clothes; enthusiasm for them and her had sensibly subsided. But while the female members of the congregation

thus assigned to her her "proper place," the men only made more and more of her—exalted her higher and higher over the heads of their own native womankind. *They* did not cool as time went on; on the contrary, they waxed warmer. The more they saw of her, the prettier they thought her; and the grace of her becoming garments never palled upon them. Nancy's youth and her English upbringing prevented her from understanding the situation as she should have done, but an effort was made to enlighten her on the occasion of the Barwingee tea-meeting.

The scene of the festival this time was a little township twelve miles off, and the festival itself was rendered important and attractive by the fact that some members of what might be called a "county family"—whose homestead was to the little township what an English manor-house might be to the village at its gates—were expected to preside over it, or, at any rate, to shed the lustre of their presence upon the proceedings. This circumstance did not weigh with Nancy, who knew nothing about it, but it induced the leading families of Wooroona to betake themselves thither in great force, the ladies in their Sunday best, the gentlemen escorting them and driving their smartest buggies.  was a sort of picnic amongst

themselves, rather than the ordinary—very ordinary—parochial function which it appeared to be. Parties were arranged for the long drive, upon the principle of natural selection, regardless of consanguinity; and by three in the afternoon the streets of the township were as gay with the departing vehicles as on a race-day morning. Everybody stopped at everybody else's door, and all drove off in company—a long procession—headed by Mr. Hardcastle, with Mrs. Brown at his side.

It was a great surprise to Mrs. Primrose to find that she was not asked to take a box-seat—or, indeed, any seat—in these family conveyances. She had naturally expected to be inundated with invitations; her only anxiety was as to who would ask her first—because, while she liked all the Wooroona men, she liked some better than others. She had taken a particular fancy to Mr. Arnold, who was an intelligent and charming fellow, and had made up her mind, if possible, to go with him. She even avoided the rest of them for a day or two, lest her design should be frustrated by other proposals. But Mr. Arnold did not ask her. Pressure had been brought to bear upon him, as it had been brought to bear upon all the Church-of-England husbands who had buggies of their

own and had shown a desire to do her honour. She did not have one invitation. This puzzled her a good deal, but it did not distress her one whit, for she attached no sort of meaning to it, and was quite content with her dear Jack for company. He, for his part—never imagining the possibility of blame or unpopularity in connection with the beautiful young wife of whom he was so proud—was charmed with the accident that enabled him to escort her to the tea-meeting in his own newly purchased trap. For a young curate he was rather bashful, and he had not relished the prospect of a twelve-mile *tête-à-tête* with a strange woman—which would have been his portion in the ordinary course of things.

Soon after luncheon, therefore, the groom at the Black Swan put their quiet horse into their single buggy, and they jogged off together at the tail of the procession aforementioned. The hindmost vehicle was just visible between the trees as they left the township and entered the bush.

“It’s rather funny—don’t you think?—that nobody wanted to take us with them,” remarked Nancy, ungrammatically, as she tucked her skirts around her.

“They regard us as bride and bridegroom still honeymooning,” said Jack; “and so we are.”

"They didn't before. Does it strike you, Jacky, that some of them are not quite as nice to us as they were at first?"

"No, I haven't noticed it. Unless—unless Mrs. Brown—"

"Oh, Mrs. Brown has settled herself to be downright nasty; anybody can see that. It's the nature of her, and I don't care a bit. I'm thinking of the others that *were* nice."

"Mrs. Hardcastle is a severe woman, they tell me—"

"She's another old cat—I don't mind *her*. She thinks it wicked to play lawn-tennis and wear a white frock. One can't bother one's self about old idiots of that stamp; and Mr. Hardcastle is so very, *very* nice! Poor old fellow! Mr. Arnold says she firmly believes that he is doomed to perdition, though he is her own husband—just because he isn't such a relentless old bigot as she is."

"She means well," said the curate, soothingly. "She has been a good friend to the church, they tell me."

"Oh, yes! I know the sort of friend—bossing everybody. She calls a white frock and tennis-playing 'carnal things.' I pity the church that lets her rule over it. She won't rule over me—I know that."

"You can manage to keep away from her," said Jack.

"I shall; but I can't keep away from Miss Hetty, and she is a good deal more like her mother than I thought she was. But I know why Hetty looks so sour." Mrs. Primrose leaned back in the buggy and laughed merrily. "She has set her heart on Dr. Debenham—poor Dr. Debenham! Such a nice, good fellow he is! And she must be at least ten years older than he, though she does dress like a school-girl."

"Poor thing!" murmured Jack. "I always feel so sorry for girls in that position. They ought to have husbands and children and homes of their own, like the young and pretty ones."

"So they ought; but it isn't my fault if she's an old maid. And I can't help it if Dr. Debenham will leave her to come and talk to me."

Jack smiled. He quite condoned Dr. Debenham.

"And Miss Debenham," pursued Nancy, "is just as silly—running after poor Mr. Prendergast—that boy!—and wanting her brother to be always at her side. As if brothers ever cared to be with sisters, when there were other women about!"

"Mrs. Lloyd is nice and pleasant, isn't she?"

"Oh, pretty well; but she said a very nasty

thing about my having men to my afternoon teas—very nasty. I didn't like it at all, and I told her so. She'd give anything to get them to hers. She said I was too fascinating," added Nancy, with a blush. "A very vulgar remark."

"Yes; but pretty women never like other pretty women coming in the way," said the Reverend John, with an air of wisdom.

"I don't call her pretty," said Nancy. "She's not to be compared with her husband. He really *is* a handsome fellow, and as nice as he's handsome. But she's nice-looking enough, and she'd have men to her teas if only she could talk of something besides the baby. It's the dearest duck of a baby, but naturally men don't want babies continually crammed down their throats."

"Mrs. Grimshaw, of the London chartered—"

"Yes, she's the best of them. I believe she really has been quite beautiful, Jack. But she thinks she is so still—she can't remember that she's over forty—and she is always laying herself out for attentions. I can see she has a grudge against me for being young. She is quite stiff and cold nowadays. I'm sure I can forgive her, poor thing! But she needn't be nasty to me for what I can't help."

The curate listened to this prattle with the air

of a doting father. In his heart of hearts he glowed with pride in the charms that so naturally put the charms of other people in the shade.

"What do you think of Mrs. Arnold?" he inquired presently.

"That she's a dear woman," replied Nancy, "but for one thing. Haven't you noticed it? She can't endure to see her husband talking to another woman. She watches him like a cat, and almost glares like one. I do think it such bad taste. And he's such a delightful man to talk to—so clever and well informed. I think I like him better than all the Woordona men—except, of course, Mr. Mackenzie. But I don't call him a Wooroona man. I wish he'd been here to-day—don't you? *He* wouldn't have left us to straggle behind in this way."

"I expect Mrs. Brown would have bagged him."

"Yes, if she could; but she wouldn't have managed it. Oh, how funny it is to see her and those poor girls straining every nerve to get hold of him—as if they were a bit his sort! I'm afraid I am dreadfully in the black books there on his account. When they wanted to drive me over to Darriwell after his call, what a way they were in to find I had been already! And I believe he never goes to see them—bad man! But, of course, he knows

what they are after, and naturally he fights shy. Besides, they can't talk to him about things that interest him, as we can. I wonder women can make themselves so cheap," said Nancy, reflectively. "I never did—for any man."

"You never had to, my dear," said the curate, as he slipped an arm around her waist. "Men never wanted to be invited to fall in love with you."

"Oh, nonsense!" she retorted, but turned her charming face to kiss him. To the best of her belief, he was the only man whose attentions she had ever desired, or ever would desire, and she felt it the height of unfairness that these Wooroona women should be jealous of her now.

In spite of the way society had seemed to neglect them on this occasion, they had a delightful drive—discussing their neighbours' and their own affairs, inhaling the aromatic scents of the forest, admiring the strange wild flowers and the flocks of parrots that flashed and whirled in all the colours of the rainbow about their path—but it was a very long one. The horse, which Nancy had herself chosen with a view to the safety of her husband's precious neck in the dark nights, ambled along leisurely, with a total disregard of all remonstrance, whether of voice or whip; and, as

Jack was no Jehu, a good deal of time was taken up in negotiating stumps and other difficulties. Moreover, having lost sight of their party, they missed their way occasionally, endeavouring to follow the right wheel-tracks amid a network of wrong ones through the confusing wilderness of scrub and gum trees. So that, when they reached their destination, not only had all the other guests arrived, unpacked themselves, and put away their respective vehicles, but the teapots of the occasion were being filled and refilled, and the company were already seated at the long tables drawing off their gloves.

As Mr. Primrose urged his reluctant horse upon the scene, half a dozen lounging men—lawyers, doctors, bankers, and what not—came forward alertly to offer their services. Those who could, assisted Mrs. Primrose to alight; those who could not, took the reins and watched her.

"We thought you were never coming! We were afraid something had happened," they exclaimed, in tones of mingled anxiety and relief.

"What should happen?" replied Nancy, airily. "We did not want to hurry ourselves. We have had a lovely drive. It seems quite a sin to go indoors on such a day."

She was looking beautiful, in a fresh white frock

and shady hat; she had not been crushed and crumpled as some of the ladies were. And she smiled upon her admirers, not noting with what wistfulness they smiled at her. "Poor little thing!" they were saying to themselves; but she did not feel poor, by any means.

Ere she had put her little foot upon the ground, out from the low-roofed banqueting hall (which was church, school-room, court-house, and everything else, as occasion required) strode a form at which the curate looked in great surprise.

"What, you here, Mackenzie?" he cried, in cordial welcome. "I didn't think *you* ever patronised tea-meetings."

"I don't," said Colin, lifting his hat to Nancy, who beamed upon him with unaffected pleasure. "I happened to be over at the Dennisons'—I had some business here—and Mrs. Dennison made me stay to carve the turkeys and things.—How are you, Mrs. Primrose? Come in with me, and let me introduce you to Mrs. Dennison. She is my cousin. I have been telling her about you and Jack.—Come along, Jack; never mind the horse. I'll send a man to take him out."

And then Nancy began to enjoy herself, after her own innocent but reprehensible manner. Mr. and Mrs. Dennison, being sought out, received her

with more than the common cordiality of the bush, with a special friendliness that quite made up for the deficiencies of other people—Mrs. Dennison because of Colin's representations, and Mr. Dennison because—well, because he was a man, and did what all men were wont to do. He was the great country gentleman whose connection with this tea-meeting had made it so attractive, and his attentions were valued accordingly. Previous to the arrival of Mrs. Primrose, he had bestowed them upon Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Arnold, and other matrons who were entitled to them, assisted by Mr. Mackenzie, who had devoted himself to Grace Brown and the younger ladies; but no sooner had Mrs. Primrose appeared upon the scene than those two men ceased to have eyes or ears for any other person. They found a place for her at Mrs. Dennison's own table—and the head of that table, too—and there they sat on either side of her, heaping her plate with titbits, and basking in the radiance of her bright face. As for her, she breathed her native air, and was happy.

"I must really apologise most humbly for not having called upon you before this," Mr. Dennison said to her at the end of five minutes' acquaintance. But how was he to know, he asked himself, that she was such a charming creature? And the

idea of driving twelve miles, or even one, to call upon the wife of a curate with whom he was not directly connected, would not have occurred to him at all but for this discovery. "You must tell us, Mrs. Primrose, when we may be permitted to make amends for our neglect."

"As soon as I am in my own house," said Nancy, drawing her gloves from her pretty white hands. "We have got one preparing for us, and shall be settled in a fortnight. Then I shall be delighted to see you."

"Tell Mackenzie to let us know.—Colin, you ought to have told us before.—Perhaps you'll dispense with formalities, Mrs. Primrose, and let him drive you over to spend a few days with us? I'm sure the Black Swan at Wooroona is no fit place for you."

"That's what Mrs. Brown says," replied Nancy, with a confidential look, "and I always tell her that it is. So I shall have to stick to it. But it does smell very beery at times, and the walls are certainly too thin. Still, it's liberty, you see."

"I expect you don't get any too much of that, eh?"

Mr. Dennison, a hearty, burly fellow, with a great, bushy beard, glanced at Mrs. Brown with one eye, and virtually winked at Nancy with the

other. Nancy looked at her plate, wrinkled her forehead, and shook her head; but all her speaking countenance was alive with fun.

"Mum's the word," said Mr. Dennison. "But when you find yourself in need of protection, apply here."

She thanked him, and said she would bear his offer in mind; whereupon Colin reminded her that he was a knight upon the spot—or very nearly upon the spot—not twelve miles off, at any rate; and he put a taste of sucking pig on one side of her plate, and Mr. Dennison a slice of a duck's breast upon the other, while Mrs. Dennison leaned over the teacups to ask her sweetly whether she took sugar and milk.

In short, Nancy was in her element. She removed her hat, which both men rushed to hang upon a peg; and there she sat, crowned with her burnished braids, lovely as a spring flower in her youth and daintiness, and knowing it just as well as anybody could tell her; and her enemies sat in silence all around and glowered at her. They wanted not to look, but she fascinated them, and they could not help it. Her face was like a magnet in the room. Those quick, dancing eyes; that straight, pert little nose, which had half a mind to curl upward; that charming, laughing mouth, with

its delicate white teeth; and the bold but softly curving chin, where so much character expressed itself, focussed all the eyes that found it possible to reach her. The women looked lower, upon a kind of white dress that they had never seen before; but the gaze of the men was fixed on her face alone, which gazed back at them sweetly, without a sign of embarrassment. The two aristocratic hosts seemed to want to shut off this public homage, for each half-turned his back upon the company, like selfish first-comers to the fire on a winter day, and they warmed themselves to their hearts' content.

It may be imagined how the Wooroona ladies liked it! Never, they said, had they seen such an exhibition of low vulgarity. Mrs. Brown declared that vulgar was the only word for it. And this a curate's wife, too! Her laugh rippled through the humming room, and her companions laughed with her, and nobody but themselves knew what it was all about. She teased them, and twitted them, and made fun of them, as if she had known them all her life, with no sense of the disparities of age and station. The Wooroona ladies, talking to one another—since no one else seemed to care to talk to them—openly expressed their unanimous opinion that Mrs. Primrose was indeed a little minx.

~~When the long tea—which resembled~~ a ball supper in its solids, if not in its liquids—was over, there was an interval for relaxation and digestion. During this interval Nancy was introduced to the farmers and storekeepers, and in a twinkling won their hearts also by her pretty looks and ways. She prattled to them as to Mr. Dennison, with that frank consciousness of her power to please which made her so certain to do it; and Mrs. Brown, in the capacity of parson's wife, soon found herself nowhere. Then came the speeches. Mrs. Primrose, still under the wing of her two distinguished hosts, sat in a corner, looking as demure as a child, while the archdeacon delivered the usual discourse. Her companions gazed patiently at the floor, and occasionally stifled a yawn on the backs of their hands; but she was wide awake and listening, taking it all in. Every now and then she shot a swift glance at her husband, who was some distance from her; and Mrs. Brown, intercepting them all, concluded that each was a gibe at her Josiah, and was consumed with appropriate resentment. Nancy did *not* make fun of the archdeacon—she liked him too well; but it was what Mrs. Brown expected of her, and therefore took for granted.

She did, however, make undisguised fun of the

magic lantern, which came after the speeches. It was a very curious magic lantern, with the most wonderful slides that ever were designed by a self-taught artist. They represented a series of scenes from Scripture history, which were described and explained by a serious young man, whose piety was more conspicuous than his learning; and both pictures and comments were so exquisitely funny that Nancy, who had a fine sense of humour, found them more than she could stand. She knew they were intended for edification, and not for amusement—in her sense of amusement—and so struggled hard to regard them seriously; but the effort was beyond her powers. If you must laugh, you must, just as you must cry if you can't help it. And the congenial spirits beside her, responsive to every gleam of her bright eyes and every inflection of her merry voice, in no way aided her to withstand the irresistible impulse. She tittered under her breath, then giggled aloud, then went off into hysterical peals of laughter that no handkerchief could stifle; while Mr. Dennison and Colin hee-hee'd and haw-haw'd in sympathy, shaking the form on which they sat with the force of their suppressed chucklings, and giving vent to terrific explosions from time to time when they found it impossible to contain themselves; in consequence

of which the whole room presently simmered with unseemly mirth, the good people were scandalised, the magic lantern was a failure (as a moral agent), and Mrs. Primrose was marked anew for disgrace and obloquy as a clergyman's wife who scoffed at sacred things. Every one saw that she was the ringleader, and no doubt she was entirely to blame. But for her, the regular and decent order of a parochial tea-meeting would have been observed, as on all previous occasions; if she had not laughed at the magic lantern, no one else would have thought of doing so. Things of that kind were not criticised upon their merits; they were simply accepted as matters of course. It was altogether her doing that a spirit of lawlessness and levity was invoked—against which the Church, as locally represented, contended in vain—and that religion, to use Mrs. Brown's words, was brought into contempt.

This crime was duly recorded against her by the avenging angels of the parish. But it was not the worst of the many that she committed that night.

CHAPTER V.

By nine o'clock the Wooroona husbands were all looking at their watches and at one another, intimating by signs and nods their mutual desire to be setting off on the return journey; and within the next hour the various buggies were furnished with their respective horses and collected upon the roadway, the drivers importuning their ladies to take their seats, while they lingered to gossip on the footpath in their pertinacious manner.

It was a lovely moonlight night, pure and cool, and almost as clear as day. Coming out of the hot and crowded room and the fumes of stale food and kerosene lamps, everybody felt and said how sweet the fresh air was, and how delicious the drive home would be. For a quarter of a mile up and down the road every stump and stone could be seen, throwing its shadow upon the sandy track, to the confusion of amateur coachmen. Every buggy was distinguishable from every other as

soon as it appeared. They came from humble inn-yards and selectors' paddocks, one by one, the horses lively after a good feed, the drivers cheered by surreptitious nips of whiskey; and, in the interval of waiting for cargo, brisk negotiations went on between roadway and footpath for a redistribution of passengers, a recombination of parties, to suit the private interests of a few young people. In the midst of the bustle and chatter, certain quick eyes took note of a vehicle spinning through the Dennisons' home paddock towards the village at a great speed; and conversation lulled as the thud of the rapid hoofs became distinct. It was not one of the vehicles of the Wooroona cavalcade.

"That you, Barnes?" called the peremptory voice of Mr. Mackenzie, as a spidery buggy, drawn by a powerful pair of horses, whose satin coats shone in the moonlight as brightly as the silver mounts of their harness, was brought to a standstill in the midst of the waiting crowd.

"Yes, sir," responded the driver, touching his hat.

"Mr. Primrose's buggy ready?"

"Yes, sir. Bob has it ready, sir."

"Got a horse, Barnes?"

"Yes, sir."



"All right. Jump down. You can be starting as soon as you like."

And Colin strode into the road, took the reins, and vaulted into the light carriage, while his groom sprang down and held the restless horses' heads.

"Hullo!" exclaimed one and another; "are *you* going with us?"

"Must," said Mr. Mackenzie. "Have to get home to-night."

"You've got your man with you?"

"Yes. He's going to ride back. He'll be useful to open gates."

Then there was a little pause and hush of expectation. It is not too much to say that nine ladies out of ten coveted the vacant seat in those springy cushions, under the 'possum rug, with a vehemence that bordered upon passion. To be singled out for honour at such a time (a dozen women of one's acquaintance looking on to see it); to have such a personally pleasant and socially distinguished companion all to one's self for twelve long miles; to be wafted through the moonlit night by those fleet horses—it was a too charming prospect! Grace Brown, conspicuous in a wide-leaved hat that swept low on one shoulder and curled high up into the air over the

other, stood well in front of the bevy of expectant ones, her heart beating with anticipated triumph; while her mother beside her was racked in an exquisite anguish of desire and doubt. Could she—dared she—let her child go off unchaperoned with this man, Mackenzie of Darriwell though he was? This was the question that tortured the arch-deacon's wife, who was proud to be a shining light and example to all the matrons of her acquaintance—to show them all the thing that was genteel and proper. She wrestled with it wildly for a few seconds, and was just making up her mind that it might be done—seeing that, though the Darriwell buggy would certainly outstrip the others like the very wind itself, they were ostensibly all of one party—when Colin, whose horses were ready to jump out of their skins with impatience to be off, called, “Come, Mrs. Primrose—are you ready?”—and the little minx, holding her husband's hand, stepped lightly into the road.

Envy, hatred, and malice took possession of the disappointed ones, and Mrs. Brown, at the head of them, was beside herself with rage.

“*What!*” she cried, in a tone which trembled with her irrepressible mortification, “are *you* going home with Mr. Mackenzie?—at *this* time of night?—*alone?*”

She was shocked at the contemplated impropriety; all the ladies were shocked. They had an immediate conviction that *they* would never have done such a thing.

"Unfortunately, I have only room for one," said Mr. Mackenzie; and his voice was not less wrathful than Mrs. Brown's.—"You are not afraid I should upset her and break her neck, are you, Jack?"

"No, indeed," replied the curate, cordially (poor, purblind creature—how the ladies pitied and despised him!); "she's a deal safer with you than she would be with me. To tell the truth, I was a little nervous about taking her through the bush, with all these shadows about, and such a lot of stumps.—Get in, darling. Wrap yourself up well—it's chilly after the hot room.—Don't let her catch cold, Mackenzie."

"Here," said Mrs. Dennison, coming forward, "take my cloud for her.—You can keep it, Colin, and give it to me some time when I am over."

Nancy said she was warm enough; she had a little Indian shawl with her, which was sufficient for her needs. But her husband made her take the extra wrap, and stood on the step of the carriage to wind one end of it round her throat, while Mr. Mackenzie arranged the other with a hand dis-

engaged for the purpose. In the clear moonlight the whole process was watched with keen attention.

"Poor Mr. Primrose!" exclaimed Lottie, with sarcastic pity. "Poor Mr. Primrose! He may take his chance. It doesn't matter if *he* breaks his neck over the stumps, does it?"

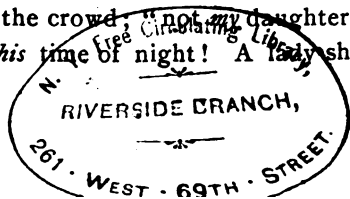
Nancy started and flushed. She turned to her husband, holding out her hand. "You will take care of yourself, Jack?" she urged, anxiously. "You will have some one with you who knows the track well? I thought you were going to let Mr. Prendergast drive you?"

"So I am," he replied; "unless *you* will trust yourself to my escort, Miss Lottie"—turning to the young lady who had just seemed to show so kind an interest in his welfare.

Charlotte laughed, and said she was much obliged, but her neck was as precious to her family as Mrs. Primrose's was to him.

"Or Miss Grace, perhaps?" suggested the curate, gallantly, continuing to blunder in his innocent man's way.

"Thank you, Mr. Primrose," interposed Mrs. Brown, her voice ringing clear and majestic over the heads of the crowd; "not *my* daughters, if you please—at *this* time of night! A lady should be



with her proper guardians at such a late hour, if she is out at all. Do you know"—with portentous solemnity—"that it will be *midnight* before we can reach home?"

Mr. Primrose was silent, puzzled to catch the drift of this question. The archdeacon was heard advising his Maria, in a gruff undertone, not to be a fool. Mr. Mackenzie flicked his horses, and made them suddenly stand on their hind legs. Nancy sat very still in her seat, while floods of unaccustomed blushes poured all over her little frame.

"I think I had better go home with Jack," she whispered, touching her companion's arm.

But it was too late. The horses were plunging with excitement and impatience; if they had not been let go, they would have smashed the buggy. "Out of the road!" shouted Colin, savagely. And men and women scattered to right and left, brief good-nights were spoken, there was a clatter and a cloud of dust, and the pair were gone—Mr. Mackenzie, the irresistible, and that wicked little flirt, who never could behave herself in any man's company. The rest of the party knew they would see them no more that night, and were a prey to the darkest forebodings. Twelve miles through the lone bush!—and at that

hour!—and not even so much as a groom with them! Alas! alas! and she a clergyman's wife, too, and her husband their own curate!

While her reputation was being torn to rags and tatters, Nancy leaned back in her comfortable seat and wondered what she had done. She was a little chatterbox, and her tongue had been going the whole evening; but now she was silent—she had nothing to say. Colin drove fast, with an angry frown on his face, guiding his fiery pair along the narrow, winding track mechanically, with the wonderful precision of an accomplished bushman. The night was as sweet as night could be, but the beauty of it, the pleasure they had anticipated from their drive, was spoiled for both of them.

"What could she mean?" said Nancy at last, in a low, troubled voice, very different from that in which she usually spoke. "If I had been a girl like Grace and Lottie, it might not have been proper—of course, I know that; but I am married. It is quite proper for me."

"She's a *beast*!" said Colin, viciously. "Don't worry yourself about her—don't waste a thought on such vulgar nonsense. I wish I had carried you off a little quicker. How do you feel? Are you comfortable? Are you warm enough?" He

drew her wraps about her more closely. "Are you tired? You look tired."

"Yes, I am a little tired," she admitted, gently. And she sighed as she leaned back in her corner. It was the first time he had heard her sigh.

However, she was too young, and her spirits too light and elastic, to be long depressed under such circumstances as then surrounded her. The breezy night, the lovely moonshine, the novelty of her position—sitting at ease in that luxurious buggy, and watching the graceful action and evolutions of those noble horses, looking up at the rustling branches overhead and the opossums scurrying away as they crashed past—elated her buoyant little soul in spite of herself, or, rather, in spite of Mrs. Brown. Soon she felt refreshed and revived by the influences about her, and began to chatter and enjoy herself as before. And then the frown departed from Mr. Mackenzie's face, and he, too, felt happy. They talked of England and their continental experiences, and Nancy charmed her companion with sundry graphic descriptions of the pleasures of her past life—balls, particularly. She described the delights of her native town in its little "season," the six weeks of spring-time when the militia officers—the "dearest fellows," from the two old colonels down—were

there for the training; and she asked her companion whether he danced, and if he liked it.

Mr. Mackenzie, being rather staid and old-fashioned for his age, little given to frivolities of any kind, had not been to a ball for years, and, as a rule, desired young ladies to regard him as a non-dancing man. But now he said he liked dancing extremely, though he was not much of a hand at it.

"Oh, so do I!" responded Nancy, with fervour; "so do I! I just *love* it! I suppose it's wrong to say so, now that I am married to a clergyman—"

"Stuff!" interrupted Colin, with energy.

"But I can't help it! It is in my blood, I think. Tea-meetings are all very well—I'm sure I never thought there was so much fun in them as we have had to-night—but, oh! I *should* like to go to a nice ball once more!"

It was not the first time she had given utterance to this mundane aspiration. He had heard her say as much before, and had remembered it.

"Well," he said, "it so happens that I am thinking of giving a ball at Darriwell soon, and I will do my very best to make it 'nice' for you—even to the extent of getting militia officers, if possible."

"No!" cried Nancy, springing upright in her seat; "you don't mean that?"

"I do. But I warn you that our militia officers may fall short of the standard; indeed, I know they will. They are not the swagger country squires that you have been accustomed to."

"Oh, I don't care. Give me the men I know, and I shall be satisfied. But do you *really* mean you will give a ball at Darriwell?"

"I mean it so really that I came over to Barwingee on purpose to talk to my cousin Laura about it—to get her advice and help. I told her I thought I ought to show some civility to these people, who are always asking me to their houses."

"Yes. And what did she say?"

"Unfortunately, she and her family are all going to New Zealand for the summer, and they start in about a week. It's a disgusting nuisance! She's such a capital hostess, and I must have a lady to preside, you know."

"Yes. But *that* could easily be managed, couldn't it?"

"Not at all so easily. Laura was my mainstay—she always is. I don't believe I have another female relative in the world; at any rate, not one I care to recognise as such."

"Need it be a relative?" inquired Nancy, smiling.

"It need not, of course. But who else is there? I will *not* have any of those Wooroona women—gossiping old cats!"

"Don't insult the Wooroona women. Remember that I am one of them; and if I am a cat, at least I am not an old one."

"Oh, *you*! You know I don't class you with that lot—nor with anybody. Ah, if I could have you in Laura's place—!"

"And why can't you?"

"I don't know—could I? Could I, really?"

"Do you mean to say you never thought of asking me, when you found you couldn't get Mrs. Dennison?" Nancy's irresistible voice had a note of reproach in it.

"Oh, didn't I?" was the eager reply. "Rather! I thought of you before I thought of Laura even; but I thought, if you were the hostess over all their heads, that old image of a Mrs. Brown, and those others that are almost as bad as she is—"

"Oh, no—not as bad as she is. Nobody can be that."

"Pretty nearly, judging from some things I have heard to-night."

"What things?"

"Never mind. What I was going to say is this: I fancied it would put them into such a rage to see you, presiding instead of them, that they would be fit to tear you limb from limb. They are none too amiable as it is, and I was afraid they would be really nasty if we provoked them to that extent."

Nancy laughed merrily. "I am sure I don't care," she said, "if you don't. I'm not afraid of them. I should just love it."

"Really? Seriously? You think it wouldn't be too unpleasant for you afterwards? The fear of that was my sole and only reason for not asking you first of all."

"Why should it be unpleasant for me? What right has any one to object? Is not Jack your own old college friend?"

"No; that was Harry."

"It's all the same. Jack is Harry's brother; they are both Primroses, and I am one of them. I think it a most natural arrangement. Besides, I do believe I should do it better than they would, though I say it that shouldn't."

"I am very sure of that," said Colin, with emphasis.

"It is just too delicious!" she went on, after a pause for rapturous contemplation. "When I

went through those great rooms of yours the other day, I thought how beautiful they would be to dance in. Indeed, I said so."

"You did," replied Colin; "and it was then I determined to have a ball."

"What! because of what I said? How sweet of you! Oh, I will see that you don't repent of it! I will do everything I know to make it a success. I have been to a good many, first and last, seeing that I only 'came out' two years ago, and I know the way of it. I shall just revel in the magnificence of being the mistress of Darriwell. I have often wondered what it felt like to be a person of importance. Now I shall know—for once."

"For once?" queried Colin, with a chuckle in his throat; but Nancy was too absorbed to notice the interruption.

"I've got such a ducky little dress," she said, "and I was beginning to fear that I should never have a chance to wear it. It's pale-blue satin—that thick sort, that hasn't any stiffness in it—with some lovely white lace on the body, and fan, and shoes, and cloak to match. Cloak white brocade, with feather border, lined with pale-blue silk."

"It sounds heavenly," said Colin.

"And I've got my wedding dress besides. White corded silk—"

"Oh, don't wear that—the blue will be far the prettiest."

"I think so, too. Blue is rather my colour. And the blue is quite new. Of course, I wore the white one pretty hard when we were going about, after we were married."

"Let's settle on the blue. It will go beautifully with your golden hair."

"My hair is brown."

"No, it's as gold as it can be—with a brown foundation—a rich, chestnut brown. One can see it shining a mile off."

Nancy laughed. She was pleased with this sincere compliment, but felt that it would be spoiled if further added to.

"And now another thing must be settled," she said, with an air of coming to business. "When is it to be?"

"Hm-m-m," murmured Colin, thoughtfully. "We must have it before the weather gets too hot, but not before you have done moving."

"That won't take long."

"And we must have a moon. We shall want all available bedrooms for the distant guests; those who live near enough must return home—except, of course, you and Jack."

"We could drive home, too, quite well."

"Certainly not. The mistress of the house! Don't imagine your office is to be such a sinecure as that. I shall want you to be hostess right through. The house will be full, remember."

"Well, I must see. I'm afraid Mrs. Brown will take that golden opportunity to order Jack to do double work."

"We must protect him. A little change would do him good. He can ride into Wooroona when he wants to."

"Yes. He would like it immensely. He doesn't have very lively times, with that woman always at his heels, telling him what he should do and what he shouldn't. And he's so meek and gentle—I could shake him!—giving in to her, as if she had any right to interfere! It would brighten him up to stay with you, and a lot of nice people in the house for him to talk to. He doesn't dance now, but he used to, and he isn't at all bigoted."

"I'll manage it," said Mr. Mackenzie. "And now fix your day."

"Isn't that for you to do?" returned Nancy.

"No. I want to suit *you*. All times are the same to me."

"Then shall we say next moon?"

"Very well. In from three to four weeks. I'll write to all the nice people I know—at least,

to as many of them as I can put up—particular militia officers.”

“Oh,” said Nancy, “never mind what they are, provided they are nice.” And she thought would be a wonderful thing if he brought to Dr. Riwell any one nicer than himself.

CHAPTER VI.

NANCY'S own house was ready for her to move into, and some of the furniture had been bought at the Wooroona stores, and some was on its way from Melbourne. The mayor owned the house—a charming six-roomed weather-board cottage, with bow-windows, creepers, and a garden round it—and had let it to the young couple at two-thirds its previous rent, “in consideration of Mr. Primrose being a clergyman,” he said, but “in consideration of Mrs. Primrose being the clergyman’s wife,” every one else said; and he had papered every room for them, put up cupboards, stained floors, built a bath-room, and otherwise consulted the convenience of his tenants regardless of expense, and in defiance of those cherished business principles whereby he had made his fortune. Nancy called him “an old dear,” and smiled on him in a manner to rouse the ire of Mrs. Mayor, who had been told—had heard, indeed, from many quarters—that the curate’s wife was a brazen hussy and a

minx. But nothing was further from Nancy's thoughts, at present, than the idea that she, who had been so warmly welcomed to Wooroona, had come to be widely regarded as the enemy of its domestic peace. She wrote home to her sisters that she had never liked the Wooroona "people" so well as now, forgetting that "people" is male and female, by the rules of English grammar.

The one sex to which she applied the term and her words of praise saw an opportunity to serve her, and took full advantage of it during the days when she was moving into her house. The curate was not only useless as a mechanic, but absorbed in the business of the parish, which demanded all his time and strength; and it was not to be supposed that Mrs. Primrose could be permitted to haul tables and chairs unassisted. Therefore, the men of the town flew to her support, and she availed herself of their services freely and with a charming gratitude.

Dr. Lloyd was the first. He had seen his morning patients at home, and was setting forth in his buggy on a round of visits, when, passing the fascinating cottage, he observed a loaded dray at the gate, and Nancy standing bareheaded in the roadway, wearing a big white apron, and sleeves rolled

to the elbow—an enchanting figure in that housewifely garb! Naturally, he pulled up.

“Good-morning, Mrs. Primrose. What, moving in at last? Oh, allow me.” He sprang to the ground in time to prevent her from receiving a straw-swathed music-stool into her uplifted arms. “What’s your husband after, to allow you to be doing this sort of thing?”

“He’s after baptisms, or weddings, or something or other. To tell the truth, I’m just as glad that he’s out of the way. This sort of thing worries him. He wants to be helping, and he hinders all the time. Oh, I can get on quite well, thank you; don’t you bother. Mr. Mackenzie sent down the station carpenter from Darriwell, but I hadn’t anything for him to do—the things had not come then—and I sent him back again. I’ve got an old charwoman helping me. She’s cleaning things in the kitchen. Please don’t waste your precious time.”

But Dr. Lloyd wasted a whole hour of it, regardless of the patients who were nervously listening for his knock, while his groom walked his horse up and down the road in the hot sun. He superintended the unloading of the dray, which had brought the Melbourne purchases, and shared Nancy’s anxiety to see that nothing had been in-

jured. They muddled and messed about together, indifferent to the flight of time, stripping off straw and sacking in the hall, rubbing and dusting and admiring the various articles, and wheeling them from place to place to see where they looked best, until suddenly Nancy exclaimed, "Oh, you poor fellow, how hot you are!" and flew off to mix the sweetest shandygaff that Dr. Lloyd had ever tasted in his life.

He was draining the delicious tumbler, with a little toast to her health and prosperity in her new house, and a little misgiving as to his neglected work, when Mr. Hardcastle appeared through the open doors, with concern on his face.

"O Mrs. Primrose, forgive me for intruding; but I saw the doctor's buggy here, and I was so afraid you were ill—"

"Come in, Mr. Hardcastle, and sit down, if you can find a place to sit on. Here's my new Chesterfield sofa—isn't it a duck? Sit here, and feel how soft it is. Oh, no, nobody is ill; Dr. Lloyd was just passing, and stopped to help me for a few minutes."

"I'm going now," said Dr. Lloyd, looking at his watch. "By Jove! I must, indeed; it's twelve o'clock."

He had been helping Mrs. Primrose not for a

few minutes, but for an hour. Hastily he flicked some straws from his smart coat; seeing which, Nancy fetched a clothes-brush, and daintily brushed him down, (while he stood, fatuously smiling, like a cat being stroked.)

"Yes, you go (you go)" urged the old police magistrate. "A doctor's time is not his own; patients must be attended to. I hear old Abbott had a bad turn last night, Lloyd. Get on with your work, my dear fellow. I'll help Mrs. Primrose, if she'll allow me that privilege.—I'm not as young as he is, Mrs. Primrose, but I'm sure you'll find me quite as useful."

"Oh, you are too good!" said Nancy—"both of you."

So the handsome doctor departed, and Mr. Hardcastle took hammer and nails and proceeded to fasten brackets and cabinets to the drawing-room wall, while Mrs. Primrose, carrying armfuls of books and ornaments to and fro, encouraged him with suggestions and thanks. He was an old man, but he was sprightly, and she found him an excellent coadjutor. In fact, she told him she didn't know what she should have done without him.

At half past twelve another hairy face appeared, diffidently peering through an open win-

dow—indeed, two hairy faces. One was Mr. Arnold's, and the other that of a delightful terrier puppy—a mere ball of grey silk, with the suggestion of a little sharp snout and two bright eyes shining through. At this latter, when it was set upon the window-sill, Nancy flew, open-armed, with a shriek of rapture.

"Oh, you sweetest, duckiest, darlingest!—O Mr. Arnold, *that* is that heavenly little creature for me?"

Mr. Arnold said it was, if she would deign to accept it—that, in fact, he had got it on purpose for her, having heard her say that she was fond of dogs. But he was afraid he had brought it too soon; he had been to the Black Swan, not knowing she was moving. Should he take it away, and keep it a few days longer?

Nancy cried, "No, no!" and begged him to come in and sit down, and said she didn't know what she could do or say to thank him for his goodness. The puppy scuffled in her arms, as if full of springs, and yapped and squeaked and licked her face; and she smothered it with kisses and caresses, while the men hung around and gazed at her with a vague yearning in their souls. They asked her what more they could do to help her, but she had lost all interest in house and

furniture for the moment; the puppy wholly absorbed her. She tempted it with biscuits and lumps of sugar and a saucer of cream (the Darriwell carpenter had brought the cream, together with other opportune conveniences); and, finding it was too excited to eat or drink, she put it down and played with it—sat on her carpetless floor, while it scampered round and round her, biting her with its needle teeth, and shrieking in a frenzy of joy. Now and then she snatched it up and hugged it, and it tore at her hair, pulling the bright locks over her face, and the men jumped to chastise it; but she only hugged it the closer, and declared that she never, never, in all her life, saw such a little angel of a dog. At which Mr. Arnold swelled with satisfaction, while Mr. Hardcastle wondered whether she would not find a good, big mastiff more useful as a watch-dog and protector in her husband's frequent absences.

So no more work was done that morning. One o'clock—the Wooroona dinner-hour—approached, and the men, being married men, began to look at their watches. As each hesitated to go, in order that the other might go before him, young Mr. Prendergast arrived, bringing a message from Mr. Primrose.

“He's very sorry, Mrs. Primrose, but there's a

case at the Five-Mile—a sick man wants to see a clergyman—and Mrs. Brown thought he had better go at once.” Mr. Prendergast spoke breathlessly, for he had hurried to perform his mission, not to keep Mrs. Primrose in suspense.

“Just like her!” ejaculated Nancy; “and I wonder whether it occurred to her to give the poor boy something to eat before he went? I dare say not. But come in, Mr. Prendergast. You look so hot—come and have a cool drink; and look at my sweet little dog that Mr. Arnold has given me. Did you ever see such a ducky little beast?”

“What about your own lunch, my dear young lady?” inquired Mr. Hardcastle. “If you are going to the Black Swan, may I—”

“But I’m not,” Nancy broke in. “I have my lunch here. I didn’t want to break into my day’s work, you see.”

“You are sure you have all you want—a proper meal?”

“Quite, thank you.” She extended one hand, while she struggled to hold the boisterous puppy in the other.

“Then good-bye for the present. I shall come again this afternoon, if I may. I must finish fixing that over-mantel.”

"Oh, you are too good! But please don't bother. You have done such a lot for me already."

He protested ardently, and went. Mr. Arnold followed him. Young Prendergast lingered in the little hall, and gazed wistfully around.

"If I could be of any use—" he murmured. "If there was anything I could do, I should be so glad—I should be so proud—"

"Oh, thank you," said Nancy. "I don't think there is anything more we can do, until I get some carpets fixed down. If you wouldn't mind calling and asking them to send a man—"

"But can't I fix them? Oh, I am sure I can—I've done it before—and save you the trouble of a man. *Do* let me, Mrs. Primrose."

She said she couldn't think of giving him such a job as that; but he urged and urged, and at last she laughingly consented. "Only in that case," she said, "I can't think of letting you go all the way home to lunch, tiring yourself out before you begin. Come in and have a snack with me. I've got bread and butter, and cheese, and half a ham, and pickles, and bottled ale, and ginger beer, and some strawberries from Darriwell, the size of apples almost—"

Mr. Prendergast interrupted her, with glowing

eyes and a deprecating hand. "Anything—anything," he murmured. "A crust of dry bread—" and he followed her through the little house with a springy step, for he was a bachelor, and there was no one to scold him for not going home to dinner.

They camped in the chaotic dining-room, and he carried the ham and the loaf, while she brought bottles and glasses, to the bare table. He mixed shandygaff in a jug, and she made mustard in a teacup; and while they discussed that delicious meal, he told her about his mother and sisters at home, and she told him about hers, and they confided to one another their secret opinions of Mrs. Brown, which were found to coincide exactly. The baby terrier, tired with its gambols, slept in Nancy's lap; so there was nothing to disturb them. Never, in all his blameless life, had the Sunday-school superintendent so enjoyed that world which theoretically he regarded as a vale of sin and tears, and in countless prayers and hymns desired to be released from. The curate's little house was better than any "mansion in the skies" for the moment, though, of course, he did not even think such blasphemy.

After lunch he went down upon his knees and tugged at the carpets with all his might, regardless

of weather and digestion; and Nancy tugged with him, stretching corners with the carving-fork, and filling his mouth with nails; until Mr. Arnold and Mr. Hardcastle returned, and, finding how she was treating herself, peremptorily stopped her. At three o'clock the banks closed, and Mr. Grimshaw, of the London chartered, hearing what was doing, joined the party, took off his coat, and trundled heavy furniture with tremendous energy. At five, poor Jack, tired and flabby, came home—it was “home” for the first time—to find the most astonishing transformation. The little house, almost empty at breakfast-time, was now habitable and beautiful, and the master's pale face brightened like a boy's as he pottered round to inspect the new arrangements.

“Wonderful! wonderful!” he exclaimed. “She's a perfect genius, isn't she?”

“She is,” the men replied, with one voice, heartily.

“Oh,” laughed Nancy, “it isn't me. It's these dear, kind fellows who have done it all. I can't tell you how good they have been.”

As Jack had had a meal at the Five-Mile, she made him lie down on the new Chesterfield sofa, with a couple of frilled silk pillows under his head; and she sent the charwoman to the confectioner's

for a bag of cakes, made tea in her own wedding-present teapot, and held a kettle-drum such as had never been known in Wooroona before—a lady's tea, and none but men at it! They were all unused to afternoon tea, except Jack, who had the feminine tastes of his profession; but they drank cup after cup, and ruined the appetites they knew they would need shortly with sweet cakes, and bread and butter, and strawberries and cream, gossiping with all the unction of old maids while they did so.

"And is Mackenzie really going to give a ball?" they cried, with genuine eagerness—even the white-haired police magistrate, whose dancing days should have been over. "Oh, I say, Primrose, you are not one of those parsons who think that sort of thing wicked, are you?"

"He is *not*," interposed Nancy, emphatically. "If he had been, he wouldn't have been my husband. He knows better than to be so narrow-minded."

Mr. Prendergast had had decided views as to the wickedness of "that sort of thing"—he had believed dancing to be an invention of the devil, like cards and horse-racing—up to this moment; now he listened and smiled like the most hardened sinner of them all. It occurred to him as possible

that pursuits so widely indulged in might be followed innocently by those accustomed to other secular entertainments. And "I suppose," he said, timidly, "that what's right for lay people is right for clerical, and *vice versa*—of course, within limits."

Which remark just showed how far Mr. Prendergast had fallen from grace within the last few weeks.

"I quite agree with you," said Nancy, with sweet cordiality. "You express my views exactly. If it's wicked for me to dance, it's wicked for all the rest of you; and if it's right for you, it's right for me."

"Then you *do* dance?" queried Dr. Debenham (for he had also looked in, in a promiscuous manner, having heard of his professional brother's luck earlier in the day).

"Why," replied Nancy, opening her eyes, "what do you take me for?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon! But I didn't know, you know. And are you going to the Darriwell ball? But of course you are."

"Well, *rather*! In point of fact, there wouldn't have been any Darriwell ball at all but for me. I am going to preside—I am going to be the lady of the house, and receive you all. That," continued

Nancy, colouring, "is because Jack is Mr. kenzie's old friend, you see."

"Certainly. Of course. Very proper. now, Mrs. Primrose, as we are on the subject you promise me the first dance?"

This was Mr. Lloyd. But all the other mediately clamoured for dances, annoyed they had not thought of it before him.

Nancy laughed and tossed her head. "like that!" she exclaimed. "No, indeed, I make no such promises. You must wait till time comes, and then take your chance.—another cup of tea, Mr. Prendergast. I suppose you don't care for such frivolities, do you?"

"I—I don't suppose I shall be invited," the young man, humbly.

"Oh, yes, you will," rejoined Nancy, proudly. "I shall see to that."

"I have not the pleasure of Mr. Mackenzie's acquaintance."

"Never mind—I have. That's all the same."

They talked until it was time to disperse their evening meals, when Mr. and Mrs. Primrose were left alone, without even the charwoman making their happy preparations for the first night in their new home.

Nancy was silent and thoughtful as she

their makeshift bed, and whisked up an egg with milk and brandy for her dear Jack's supper—for Jack's digestion did not allow him to sleep upon solid food. "I wish," she remarked, "that I had not been so stupid as to tell them that I was going to preside at Darriwell. They will go and tell those women, and make them wild with jealousy, and they'll be twice as nasty to me as they are now—I know they will."

But, strange to say, the men never breathed a word—not one of them. The insult put upon Mrs. Brown, who was the archdeacon's wife, and upon Mrs. Hardcastle (not that she would have countenanced such "carnal" doings, but still it was due to her to be asked), who had nursed Colin as a baby and known his mother, and upon the other matrons of the district, who for years had lived there and been his friends, was not discovered until the great night arrived; when the sight of Nancy in her blue satin at the ball-room door, attended by their host, and Mr. Mackenzie's murmured remark to one and another that "Mrs. Primrose, his old friend Jack's wife, had been so kind as to come and help him," revealed the state of things.

CHAPTER VII.

DARRIWELL was one of the fine modern houses of the bush, which are everywhere superseding the charming agglomerations of rustic architecture in which our squatters dwelt when they were squatters; it would have been as suitable to any country as to Australia, save in the feature of balconies and verandas, which spread deeply all around it under the heavy colonnades. A regular country gentleman's "mansion" in its solidity of brick and stone, and lines upon lines of sash windows, and in the great stretches of speechless gravel and watered lawns, the mathematical terraces and flowerbeds, that lay around it. And the place was "kept up" as a place of that sort should be, except that Mr. Mackenzie objected to men-servants within doors. The male domestic is difficult to get, and seldom satisfactory when you do get him. As with governors, bishops, and other imported dignitaries, the country does not suit him. He is not made for conditions so totally at variance with

the system on which he was brought up. A good housekeeper and half a dozen smart, light-footed maids are worth all the butlers and footmen that ever came here to turn up their noses at our ways of doing things—to those who care more for comfort than for show—and Mr. Mackenzie knew this, for he was a sensible man and an excellent manager.

There are certain men, methodical and particular, who can "run" an establishment as well as a woman, if not better; and he was one of them. In fact, there had been irregularities in his wife's time that had fretted him sorely. Stores would run out; cooks would put loaves of bread and joints of good meat into the pig-tub; tradesmen's accounts would get confused; moths would find harbourage in the folds of curtains and dust in the buttoned puckers of arm-chairs and sofas. Since her death nothing of this sort had happened, because he alone had administered affairs. Only the best of well-trained servants were kept at Darriwell, where they were treated handsomely, according to their deserts; and every one of them was accustomed to feel the master's eye upon her. Mrs. Towers, the housekeeper, had no sense of loneliness in her high position, for every day she had her master's company in store-room and pan-

try, and his sympathy in all her interests. He understood the mysteries of her department as thoroughly as she did, and was always ready with valuable suggestions. For such a master, of course, it was a pleasure to do things as they should be done. A mistress, who would be so particular, might not have pleased so well.

So Darriwell was a model house; and Nancy, when driving up to its great porch, the day before the ball, to enter upon her brief reign as its honorary mistress, thought it the handsomest she had seen in Australia. She was no more artistically cultured than nine educated people out of ten, and infinitely preferred it to the beautiful old bush homes that are all going so fast, the good taste of which will never be properly understood until our "early days" have become ancient history.

"So English!" she exclaimed, as she stepped into the cool, paved hall. "Why, I could imagine myself at home again!"

Mrs. Towers escorted her up the wide stairs to a suite of spacious rooms—the chief guest-chambers of the house; and a smart maid brought tea, and transferred her clothes to drawers and wardrobe, and turned on the bath, and offered to help her to dress for dinner. The loveliest fresh flow-

bloomed in precious vases, among silver-topped bottles of eau-de-cologne and toilet vinegar, and every little luxury that a woman could want. Nancy sent away the maid, with smiling thanks, that she might be alone with Jack and free to express her views of the situation.

"Isn't it perfectly delicious?" she cried, clasping her hands and dancing round and round. "Isn't he a perfect *dear*?"

"That Mrs. Towers is certainly a treasure," said Jack, peeping into a silver powder-box. "She seems to have thought of everything."

"Oh, it isn't Mrs. Towers," replied Nancy, confidently. "It's *him*! He always does think of everything."

"Well, I suppose, when a man has been married, he knows—"

"Go and have your bath, Jacky, and get dressed, so that you can help me. I shall want you to lace me up. Oh, how glad I am that I brought my white silk, too! Dear old gown! Doesn't it remind you—?" She put her bare arms round the curate's narrow shoulders and tenderly kissed him. "It's not a bit too smart for this house, and there are eleven guests here already, Mrs. Towers says. Isn't it lovely? Isn't

it a blessed change, after those Wooroona tea parties? O Jack, how nice it will feel to put on an evening dress once more!"

She put it on, about half an hour later—the old wedding dress, remodelled for these purposes—and stood looking at herself in the long mirror, while Jack, with many fumbings, laboriously laced the pliant bodice over her slim little figure, which was as charming as her face. A prettier picture never was framed in the frame of a looking-glass, and she knew it, and delighted in the knowledge—anticipating the expression she would see in the eyes of the eleven guests when she should appear before them, having done full justice to herself for the first time in Australia, as she believed. Most carefully had she piled her golden-chestnut hair on the top of her head and arranged the careless-looking, feathery curls upon her brow; for the rest, youth and Nature had done all that was necessary. The tint and texture of her fair and healthy skin were unsurpassable, and the curves of throat and shoulders such as justified her keen enjoyment of an evening dress.

"No jewels, Jacky," she remarked, after a thoughtful pause. "Just this plain gown, that hasn't got a pucker anywhere—I wonder whether they'll see how beautifully it is made, and how

lovely the silk is?—and perhaps a couple of these yellow roses—”

“The plainer the better,” said Jack, who did not want her wholly to forget that she was a curate’s wife.

So, at a few minutes to eight, she emerged upon the corridor, a striking object in her rich simplicity, buttoning her long tan gloves with the serene, accustomed air of a born great lady; and Jack humbly followed at her heels, skipping now and then to avoid treading upon her train. Her host met her at the foot of the stairs, looked her up and down and smiled in a way that made her laugh and blush.

“Well,” she said, “am I all right?”

He laughed himself at the preposterous question, and extended a formal elbow. “Look here,” he said, in some agitation, “I want to take you in to dinner, but there’s an old dowager here—”

“And I am the mistress of the house,” she broke in, “and so of *course* you can’t take me in. Find me a nice man—any man will do.”

“I wonder who you’d like best?” He considered anxiously. “Are you partial to sailors at all?”

“Sailors!” she echoed. “I simply *love* them.”

The fact was that every officer of the ship that

brought her out had been her slave, to the extent of his opportunities, and she had naturally regarded them as "the dearest fellows" in return.

"That's all right," said Mr. Mackenzie. "Then I'll give you Brackenbury. He's a stranger, too. All the others know each other, more or less."

Then they entered the drawing-room—the lady with all the graceful serenity of one who knows herself "all right," her escort with the pride of a host in a hostess that does him credit—and the eleven guests, who had not expected to be impressed by a curate's wife, however exceptional, were properly astonished.

"*That* Mrs. Primrose? Good gracious!" was in their eyes, and even (in whispers) on their lips; and Nancy distinctly heard a man ejaculate, "By Jove!" Her little bosom swelled with responsive interest in that man, and she at once hoped that his name was Brackenbury.

It was. When she had been introduced to the dowager and her two daughters, to five country gentlemen (comprising three militia officers, though they did not look like it), and two ladies belonging to them—none of whom struck her fancy—she was brought face to face with a fine, square-shouldered, tawny-bearded fellow, with a bold nose and quick, commanding eyes; and Mr. Mackenzie said, "Cap-

tain Brackenbury—Mrs. Primrose. Your present hostess, captain—only she ought to have been here hours ago. And will you take her in to dinner?"

As he spoke, a great bell clanged through the house, and Captain Brackenbury bowed, and offered his arm. Nancy, smiling all over, took it with her little, confiding air; and they stood aside while the other ladies paired and passed out to the dining-room. Yes, it was this "dear fellow" who had said "By Jove!" and there was not a man present who had half his good looks—not even Mr. Mackenzie. She was charmed with the luck that had given him to her; she foresaw that they would be the best of friends.

"It is not my fault that I did not get here sooner," she said, beginning at once to talk to him. "I was ready at two o'clock, and might have been here before three. I had to wait for my husband—I knew I should. Is it long since you arrived, Captain Brackenbury?"

"Not an hour, Mrs. Primrose. We only came in this morning."

"Came in? Oh, your ship, you mean. What ship?"

"The *Gibraltar*."

"Oh, are you the captain of the *Gibraltar*?"

How odd! We had quite settled to come out by her, only we had to start sooner, because my husband seemed to be wanted, and he thought we oughtn't to waste more time. We were as nearly as possible coming with you."

"I am very sorry you changed your mind."

"Yes. I could have spent a few more weeks at home very happily. I had dozens of visits to make, and the rest was doing my husband so much good. He never would rest enough, even when he could. Now they won't let him think of such a thing."

"You have not been out long, then?" said Captain Brackenbury. He ignored the husband as a topic of interest, but regarded the wife intently out of the corner of his eye.

"Only a few weeks. We came by the *Adelaide*. We had the most delightful voyage. I do so *love* the P. & O. Of course, I don't know anything about the other lines, but I'm sure they can't be so nice. Everybody was so attentive and kind."

"Naturally."

"Oh, why naturally? I've heard people make dreadful complaints. There's an old lady in Wooroona—but then she's a disagreeable old person, and I don't wonder people were uncivil

to her—I'm afraid I'm rather uncivil to her myself."

Captain Brackenbury laughed. Then he drew himself up with an air of pride. Host and guests were filing by in pairs, and every eye was turned upon his companion as it passed. "Upon my word," he said, "I don't know what I've done to be singled out for honour in this way."

"What honour?" inquired Nancy. But of course she knew, and Captain Brackenbury knew that she knew, and only laughed again as they fell into their places at the end of the procession. "I don't see how anybody—anybody *here*—can take precedence of the captain of a ship," she said.

"Not *on* his ship. But off it—that's a different matter, Mrs. Primrose."

"Apparently Mr. Mackenzie doesn't think so. I don't, certainly. A king is a king even when he is not sitting upon his throne."

The sailor bowed low. He was on the point of saying that he was sometimes a slave, but thought better of it.

All the company stood and looked at Nancy as she passed to her place at the head of the table. She did it with mingled modesty and dignity, smiling at her host, who leaned anxiously to-

wards her from the other end. She thought she had never seen him look so well and bright.

"You don't mind?" he called, with uplifted brows.

She intimated by signs that she not only did not mind, but liked it; and Jack shut his eyes and said grace, and they all rustled down and began to eat and talk, till the great room buzzed like a beehive.

The hostess drew off her gloves—the pretty gloves that had come out from London in a sealed bottle—and laid them over her knee. Her hands were a great deal prettier than her gloves, and Captain Brackenbury looked at them, and then at her smooth neck, and then at her charming face, with that shining crown above it. A sailor's eye is very quick to note such things, and Mrs. Primrose, in this case, was quite aware of it. She felt that eye through the back of her head as she turned to talk to her right-hand neighbour, that he might not feel himself in the cold.

He was a "militia officer," and she plunged into military subjects straightway, wanting to know wherein colonial systems differed from the one she knew, until he felt, as man and as soldier, that here was one who appreciated his true position at last. It was a way she had. So con-

summate was her tact and charm, that she could delude a vain man into the belief that he monopolised her whole attention, while her thoughts and interest were bestowed upon another. It was merely in the kindness of her heart that she flattered the right-hand neighbour; he was of no consequence whatever. While she prattled and smiled, she said to herself: "What a great, strong fellow! How I do love a man that really *is* a man!" But it was not him she meant; it was the person on her left.

"Are you glad to be off the sea, Captain Brackenbury?" she asked him sweetly, between the soup and the fish. It was pleasant to look at him, and to hear his voice, which seemed to have the sound of the sea in it, it was so rich and deep in tone.

He said he was—that every sailor was. His idea of complete and utter bliss was a shore bed, and a square sleep of, say, ten hours in it.

"Well, you can get a square sleep to-night," she said; "but I don't know about to-morrow night."

"Ah, to-morrow night!" he sighed. "No. That will be another matter."

She was going to tell him how long it was since she had been to a ball, and how much she was

looking forward to to-morrow night—expecting him to take the hint and ask for dances—when a fear seized her. “You don’t mean to say,” she exclaimed, “that you won’t be here?”

“Alas!” he responded, shaking his head, “we are not at the end of our voyage yet. Now, if Mackenzie had only waited till we were berthed at Sydney—”

“How I wish he had! and we *could* have waited so easily—it wouldn’t have made a scrap of difference. But he never told me about you.”

She was honestly sorry, and not pretending to be so for the sake of pleasing him. She thought him quite the nicest of all the Darriwell party, and far, *far* the handsomest. She asked him sadly when he had to go, and he said as soon as he had had his breakfast, because the *Gibraltar* sailed at two. Mackenzie would send him over to the morning train.

“What a pity!” said Nancy.

“I keenly feel that it is so,” said Captain Brackenbury.

“It wasn’t worth coming so far, to get so little.”

“Oh, yes. It was quite worth it.”

“Well, that’s right. You must try to slip off early, so as to get your square sleep. I suppose”

—colouring faintly as she looked at him, because his eyes were so sharp and searching—
“I suppose you are an old friend of Mr. Mackenzie’s?”

“Not very old. He came out with me some months ago. We took a liking to each other.”

“Yes. I can understand that.”

“You, I suppose, are—his sister, perhaps?”

“Oh, no; what makes you think that? Because I am presiding here? No, my husband is his old friend—my husband’s brother, rather.”

She plunged into explanations. But she did not explain—what he was beginning to wish to know—who and what her husband was.

So, with a rapid occasional word and smile to the soldier neighbour, she talked with great enjoyment to the sailor until the end of dinner, and beyond—until the rest of the company seemed to fall silent to listen to her—until Captain Brackenbury said gravely, “I’m awfully sorry, Mrs. Primrose—I don’t want you to go—far from it—but I think it’s my duty to inform you that that old lady at the other end of the table has been glaring at you steadily for full five minutes.”

“Oh, good gracious!” Nancy cried, snatching up her gloves. “I *quite* forgot that I was the lady of the house.”

She flung a deprecating smile at the host as his face rose behind the flowers, and he smiled his forgiveness back at her. Then she passed from the room, into the clutches of the old lady, who wanted to know how many there were in the Wooroona Sunday-school, and whether she realised the necessity for economy on the part of a clergyman's wife with so poor an income.

Captain Brackenbury moved up the table, and took the old lady's vacant chair.

"Who's Mrs. Primrose?" he inquired of his host, as soon as he found an opportunity.

"Mrs. Primrose?" repeated Mackenzie, a little stiffly. "She is the wife of our curate."

"*Curate!*" Captain Brackenbury fell back in his chair with the shock of this announcement. "*That* woman the wife of a curate!"

"The Reverend John Primrose—quite a good family—old friends of mine at home. That's him, sitting over there."

The sailor glared in the direction indicated. Jack was happily engaged in conversation with a neighbouring land-owner, who was also a parishioner—a parishioner who could, if he liked, powerfully advance certain parochial reforms that the curate had at heart.

"A very nice fellow," said the host, still in a

somewhat formal tone. "Would you like me to introduce you?"

"No, thanks. Parsons are not in my line."

Captain Brackenbury continued to stare at the presumptuous person who was Nancy's husband, with a hostile eye. Then it occurred to him that time was too precious to waste in that manner, and he suggested an adjournment to the drawing-room.

There sat Nancy on a low chair, wistfully gazing at the door. The old lady, with a patronising and superior air, was advising her for her good—not understanding that a stout dowager of sixty, rolling in wealth and consequence, is a mere nobody compared with the humblest pretty girl—and the curate's wife knew whence deliverance would come. Her charming face lighted up as if a match had been put to it, when, after ten minutes' absence, the men came streaming in, with the splendid figure of the captain of the *Gibraltar* at their head.

She drew her silken skirts aside, and the sailor, ever ready in an emergency, dropped into the chair at her elbow. The next moment her host stood before her, carefully ignoring the invitation in the eye and gestures of the old lady.

"Mrs. Primrose, you haven't seen the ball-room

since it was finished," he said. "Come and look at it, and tell us if you think it will do."

Nancy jumped up joyously, and was escorted through the conservatory and a winding passage, full of cunning private corners, masked with tree-ferns and curtains, to a large marquee in the garden (it was better to have a marquee, Mr. Mackenzie thought, than to upset the beautiful order of the house); and, though they were not asked to do so, the men all followed her like a flock of sheep, and, of course, the ladies accompanied the men.

She had seen the marquee in its original nakedness, and had tried the floor and pronounced it perfect; now, as a hurrying servant lit group after group of bracket lamps, the great room disclosed itself as a fairy scene of ferns and palms and high-art draperies, covering the canvas walls. There were sofas and arm-chairs and little tables in the corners, and a number of wicker settees, nicely cushioned, along the sides; there was a stage at the end, and on the stage a grand piano, bowered in pot plants.

"We'll have a lot more flowers in to-morrow," said Mr. Mackenzie. "And some violinists are coming up from town." He was a careful man with money, as a rule, but this time he had deter-

mined to do the thing handsomely, regardless of expense.

"Nancy was in raptures. "Oh, how delicious! Oh, how truly charming!" she cried. "Oh, what taste you have! What sweet colours! What an enchanting floor!" She held back her trailing skirt, and her little feet began to slide and glide to the measure of some inaudible dance-tune. "Couldn't—oh, *couldn't* somebody play something?"

One of the militia officers, who prided himself on being musical, rushed to the piano and began to strum the "Blue Danube"—and then thought, when it was too late, how silly he had been! His fellows, to a man, turned to their hostess, speechless with eagerness, almost holding out their arms.

"Take me," said Captain Brackenbury, who in the moment of danger was never at a loss. "They can all dance with you to-morrow night—I can't."

"Ah, true!" she responded, before the words were out of his mouth; and the next moment her hand lay on his shoulder, and his firmly grasped her supple waist. It was like holding a bird that wanted to fly.

"Are you sure you can dance?" she asked him.

"I thank my stars I can!" he replied, more emphatically than was quite necessary.

His boast was justified. He danced excellently. There was a slight sea-roll in his gait, but no looseness or vacillation; he was as ready in this as in more serious pursuits, master of himself, full of vigour and resource. He held her in a way more beautifully supporting than ever man had held her before, while leaving her to dance with her own feather lightness, like a leaf fluttering upon a wall. In half a minute they had grown accustomed to each other's step, and then they went on and on, as if nothing could tire them.

The others watched them jealously. One by one the men who had been disappointed of the prize offered themselves to other ladies, and fresh couples joined the leading pair, left them, joined them again, and flagged, and ceased. It was a half-hearted business on the part of the men, who could not keep themselves from watching the white figure of their enchantress floating round the room on another's breast. They leaned their backs against the decorated wall, and chewed their mustaches, and thanked Heaven that that great hulking brute, who danced (in their opinion) like a hippopotamus, would be gone before to-morrow

night. The ladies sat on settees beside them, with set smiles on their faces; and the fact—so well known to those who were acquainted with her—began to dawn upon them for the first time, that Mrs. Primrose was a minx.

“She calls herself the hostess,” said a squatter’s wife (in her early forties); “but I fancy she is not much accustomed to entertaining guests.”

“Of a certain class, perhaps,” said the mother of grown-up daughters.

Again Nancy had wholly forgotten that she was the hostess. She left the host to fill the place of both, while she danced and danced, till she could dance no more. Several times the music slowed down, and the patience of the performer showed signs of giving out, and he was urged on again by a nod from Captain Brackenbury, whose fixed determination was to make the most of this opportunity, since he might never get another. Each time his partner looked up at him with an acquiescent smile, making no secret of her willingness to oblige him. Then she suddenly became aware of the wistful faces watching her, her husband’s amongst them; felt that her head was beginning to swim, and remembered that she was the hostess. She swung out of the strong arms into a handy chair, and gasped for breath.

"Oh, that was lovely!" she sighed. "I could have gone on all night."

"And I," said Captain Brackenbury.

Then he stood silent beside her, and glowered, for he was a dog that had had its day. The musician, skipping from the music-stool, had come to remonstrate with Mrs. Primrose for permitting herself to be overtaxed, and to ask her to allow him to get her something to restore her. The rest of the party streamed towards her, all bent on her rescue from the clutches of this inconsiderate sailor-man. She extended her hand to the curate, who would otherwise have been crowded out.

"No, Jacky, dear, I'm not tired a bit," she said, drawing him to her side. "Come and be introduced to Captain Brackenbury.—My husband, Captain Brackenbury. I don't think I ever enjoyed a waltz so much. It's the first I have had for such a long time, you see. And the floor is so good, and it's so charming to have such a lot of room—not to be crowded up with people dancing all round you. And Captain Brackenbury's step suits mine exactly. I used to think only soldiers could dance *quite* perfectly, but sailors can too, sometimes."

"Try a soldier, for a change," pleaded the

young man who had been her right-hand neighbour at dinner.

But she shook her head.

"Not to-night. To-morrow night, if you like."

"No, don't dance any more to-night," whispered Jack. "Come and talk to Cleveland. He has all but promised me twenty pounds for our new church. He wants to know you."

"Certainly," said Nancy. And she attached herself to Mr. Cleveland forthwith. The party strolled back to the house; the ball-room lights were put out; Captain Brackenbury presently retired to the smoking-room, and thence to bed.

"Perhaps it's as well I can't stay over to-morrow," he thought, as, lying there, he reflected upon the event of the evening. And, quite against his wish—for he was really a right-minded man and a gentleman—he thought, further, that he would like to take that curate to sea with him and drop him overboard on a dark night. What business had such a man with such a woman as she? The arms that had held her little body could not get rid of the feel of it. It kept him from sleeping as well as he should have done in such a delicious shore bed.

Next morning he went away. Host and hostess stood on the door-step to bid him good-bye.

Nancy wore one of her best white gowns, and a drawn white hat tilted back on her head. She had roses pinned at her throat and tucked into her belt, and her face was like a spring flower, and her hair shining as if spun out of sunbeams.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Primrose," said the departing guest, trying not to be too bold with the frank hand she gave him. "Thank you again for that dance. It won't be the last we shall have together, I hope."

"I hope not," she replied, sincerely. "I do wish you could have stayed till to-morrow."

His foot was on the step of the buggy, and his host had an air of waiting to assist him into it.

"Why don't you give two, Mackenzie? Now you've got the marquee, and all, you might as well."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nancy, struck by this happy thought.

"I shall be a free man after this week," remarked Captain Brackenbury, casually, as he tucked himself into his seat.

"I'm afraid I shall not be at home after this week," said Mr. Mackenzie, who until this moment had not thought of leaving. "Otherwise I would have given a dozen with pleasure. It's a horrible nuisance that you have to go, but better to get

this glimpse of you than none at all. Well, good-bye, old fellow"—shaking hands with the utmost cordiality. "You may see me over in Sydney while you are there."

The groom took whip and reins, Captain Brackenbury looked round and raised his hat, and the buggy rattled off. Nancy lingered on the doorstep and watched it wistfully.

"*What* a nice fellow!" she ejaculated, almost with a sigh.

"Yes," said her host, "a capital fellow. But like all sailors, you know—a sweetheart in every port."

Nancy blushed. "I call that a very nasty thing to say—just what you would expect from one of those old cats at Wooroona," she retorted. "I don't think he is a man of that sort at all."

Mackenzie smiled a smile intended to imply that the thoughts of an innocent young creature like her were of no value in such a case, and asked her to join him in a game of tennis.

"They've all gone down to the court," he said; "let's go and beat them, you and I."

"To be sure we will," she replied, blithely. And they did. She was almost as fond of tennis as of dancing, and threw her whole heart into it till lunch-time—beating everybody.

Then a luxurious afternoon—tea and tea-gown, photographs, novels, and downy sofa-pillows, and then the ball. *The* ball. Captain Brackenbury certainly left a void that nobody else seemed able to fill; otherwise expectation was more than realised.

The hostess was simply dazzling in her blue satin. Such a dress had never been seen before in those parts, nor such a perfect little figure to show it off. Mrs. Brown said the cut of it round the bust was disgraceful—that she didn't know where to look, she was so ashamed; but there were folds of gauze above the blue which Mrs. Brown did not choose to take account of, and against the dead whiteness of that dainty stuff the living whiteness of the pure skin showed its young perfection as modestly as the fashion of full dress permitted. She wore a string of pearls round her graceful throat, and the Wooroona ladies, consulting about them together, decided that they were false, and wondered how any woman, calling herself a lady, could bedizen herself with such tawdry rubbish; the fact being that they were the wedding present of the aunt who used to take her abroad, an old person of some property in family jewels, who had inherited the necklace from a succession of grandmothers orthodox as herself in *their* ideas about such things.

Mrs. Primrose, in short, was the beauty of the occasion and queen over all, and thereby sinned her worst sin in the eyes of the parish. The parish, in the persons of its most powerful representatives, had borne with her, it believed and declared, with a patience that was almost culpable, up to this point; now it confessed that such a scandal to its good name could no longer be conscientiously winked at. It behooved those who had the interests of the Church at heart to speak out at whatever pain to themselves, as dear Mrs. Brown had told them.

So they spoke out—sitting in corners together, and watching the sinner vigilantly. She danced every dance (no matter who sat out, she was never without a partner, plainly devoted to her with the devotion one gives to the woman rather than the hostess), and they called her opprobrious classical names, which more than implied that she was no better than she should be—that the men who admired her were the victims of unholy spells. She gave orders to the servants with a cool assurance and assumption of authority that clearly showed she was more familiar with Mr. Mackenzie and his house than any woman ought to be who did not belong to him—alas! had they not foreseen this when she went off with him alone after the Bar-

wingee tea-meeting? Doubtless the disgraceful connection was inaugurated on that fatal night. She laughed and chattered in such an extraordinary manner ("rowdy," Mrs. Brown called it; she was sorry to sully her lips with such a vulgar expression, but really it was the only word that could describe Mrs. Primrose's conduct), and her eyes were so bright, and her cheeks were so flushed, that it was very evident she had taken more champagne than was good for her. Three separate times did they see the servant fill her glass at supper, and who was to tell how much she had had during the evening? And they wondered what the bishop would say if he knew? And they wondered if it was not the bounden duty of somebody to tell him—for the sake of the Church?

They went home at last—like mere common nobodies—and the curate's wife remained to sleep, though she had no farther to go than they had. They said they never would have gone to Darriwell had they known what they were going to be exposed to; and Nancy said the ball would have been quite perfect had those old cats been absent from it. She made the remark to Jack as he unlaced her before the looking-glass.

"I am afraid," said he, "they don't altogether

approve of balls. From what Mrs. Brown said to me—”

“Oh, don’t quote that old idiot!” exclaimed Nancy, interrupting him. “If she doesn’t approve of balls, why does she let Grace and Lottie go to them? Poor girls, what objects they did look, with those little bunches of artificial flowers stuck all over them! I am afraid they didn’t get all the attention they expected—but then there were so many to attend to—and that’s why Mrs. Brown was dissatisfied. What did she say?”

“She said she was afraid this sort of thing unsettled us for our duties—something of that sort. And, to tell the truth, Nancy dear, I half think she’s right.”

“Oh, no, Jacky, you don’t. Stuff and nonsense! I’m sure religion was never meant to make us all dull and doleful—sour old creatures like her. She says those things out of mere spitefulness, just to have a slap at somebody—at me, no doubt.”

“Don’t be uncharitable, Nan.”

“I’m not—I’m not; she isn’t worth taking the trouble to be uncharitable about—old image that she is! Oh, if only we could have exchanged her for Captain Brackenbury!”

“I don’t know what you see in that man to ad-

mire so," said Mr. Primrose, with a slight accent of discontent.

"He's a dear," said Nancy, emphatically.

"That's vague," said Jack. "Tell me why he is a dear."

She considered a moment, smiling to herself. "In the first place, he dances better than all the other men put together. Not really better, perhaps, but he suits me better."

"He looked heavy enough to swamp you."

"Yes; but he uses his strength superbly. He's like one of those steam-hammers that can crack a nut, don't you know?—powerful and gentle, both at once. I'm sure he's a splendid fellow. Just the man to command a great ship like the *Gibraltar*. I wonder whereabouts the *Gibraltar* is now?"

"Well, now, Nancy, you must try to think of something else besides dancing and dancing men, mustn't you? The ball is over now, and perhaps it's just as well for us that it is, and that such dissipations don't come in our way often. I feel myself that it is a temptation to worldliness—"

"O Jacky, don't—*don't!* Don't spoil it all!"

"My dearest child—!"

"I know, dear—of course you are right—you always are—and I am just a heathen born. I can't

help it. I think I'm not old enough yet to feel that it's wicked to be happy—"

"Happy, Nancy?"

"Merry, then—call it what you like. '*Don't* look at me in that tone of voice!' Come out on this beautiful balcony and look at the moon." She had divested herself of her blue satin and pearls, and now hastily wrapped a dressing-gown about her. "What a divine night!" she ejaculated, as she stepped into it through a large French window. "What a fairy-land this garden looks now! Like a dream. It's all like a dream, somehow—and I don't want to be wakened up till to-morrow morning, Jacky."

The curate sighed. He was almost sure that this was not a healthy frame of mind, but he could not bear to tease her, so he said nothing; and she laid her arms on the balustrade, and gazed over the moonlighted country, wondering whereabouts the sea was, until the cool air, irritating his weak lungs, provoked a little cough that had begun to make her anxious, when she quickly roused from her reverie to give all her thoughts to him.

Next morning Nancy was quite wakened up—ready to throw off the enchantments of a worldly world and to return to the parish and her battles with Mrs. Brown, as if nothing had happened.

Indeed, she was eager to get back to her own little home, and the precious puppy that it had cost her pangs to leave behind.

She was prevailed on to wait until after lunch, when, nearly all the guests being got rid of, Mr. Mackenzie was able to drive her home himself. The parish witnessed her arrival, thus escorted, and turned its head away rather than countenance such brazen impudence with bows. For Jack had ridden in to christenings earlier in the day, and was not in the buggy with them—only at his garden gate to receive his wife, with the puppy washed and combed, and tea ready, and smiles of welcome on his face.

Mr. Mackenzie was asked to stay for a cup of tea, and would have done so, but for that marital expression which the curate wore—which said, as plainly as an honest countenance could speak, that its owner was hungering to have his companion to himself after getting only the scraps of her for two long days. Recognising the hollowness of an apparently cordial invitation, their late host said good-bye to the young couple at their gate, and drove back to Darriwell, which struck him as feeling much lonelier and emptier than it had done before the ball. Jack and Nancy sat down on their Chesterfield sofa, side by side, and drank tea

together as comfortably as the puppy would allow; and said how nice it was to be at home again, and how delicious the little house looked, all new and dainty, with its fresh paint and pretty furniture, and every wedding present in its place.

"And now we must settle down to steady, serious life," said the curate, slipping an arm round his wife's waist; "mustn't we, little woman?"

"Yes," she replied, cheerfully. "I told them all last night that I should be really 'at home' after to-day. I wonder whether Joanna thought to order eggs? I must make some cakes before the callers come."

"Let Joanna make the cakes, and you have a morning's round with me," the husband gently suggested, bearing anxiously in mind some things he had heard said last night, while dutifully devoting himself to the parish ladies.

"Certainly not," replied Nancy. "Joanna is a good soul, but she could no more make cakes—*my* cakes—than she could fly. I am not going to disgrace my calling as a housekeeper in the eyes of those women." She nearly said "those cats," but checked herself in time. It had dawned upon her that Jack didn't like it.

Mr. Primrose had half a mind to refer to an-

other calling, which she was supposed to follow to some extent, in association with him; but he forbore. He was convinced of the expediency of her making at least a show of conformity to accepted rules, but he had not the heart to bother her. When morning came he went forth alone to his parish visitings, as he always did, except when she wanted a walk, or had had her heart touched by some tale of woe which, on its merits, naturally demanded her intervention; and she tied on a big apron, rolled up her sleeves, and plunged into her cake-making with all the ardour of a young house-keeper on her promotion, conscious of a special talent in that particular line.

And her cakes were delicious. They were all spread out on the pantry shelf when Jack came home—three several kinds—and he ate one of each to prove how good they were, thereby ruining his appetite for the midday meal. Three pounds of butter had been used, and as many dozens of eggs, for Nancy said she might as well lay in a stock while she was about it. She was sure to have shoals of people coming, and cakes of such excellence would be eaten freely.

But the shoals of people did not come—they sternly stayed away—all but a few awkward, shamefaced men, who in this case did not count.

Not even their curiosity to see the inside of her new house, though sharper than a serpent's tooth, prevailed over the determination of the Wooroona ladies—a determination come to after much serious consultation together—to do their duty as defenders of the Church and of the morals of the community. "Without fear or favour," they said; meaning without favour to the culprit or fear of their indignant male relatives.

Poor Nancy! Perhaps she deserved it—perhaps she didn't; at any rate, her fate was sealed, and no one of all those men whose kind hearts bled with pity for her, and who did indeed make the lives of their wives and sisters a burden to them for her sake when opportunity offered, was able to save her from it. We all know what one vindictive female can do in the way of humbling a rival, if she makes up her mind to it; the systematic combination of a score of them is simply irresistible. An archangel could not stand up against it. It is no use to say, in such a case, that innocence will vindicate itself, and that right will triumph sooner or later; they do no such thing. Let a woman be damned by her fellow-women's tongues, and damned she will be to the end of the chapter—unless she comes into money, which covers all sins.

Nancy became unpopular; nay, she was regarded as a reprobate. The leading families justified themselves in plain statements for cold-shouldering her out of the domestic circle; the cottage folk, drinking at the common well of local gossip, looked askance at her, and thought what pity it was that such a nice young lady should be so different from what she seemed. People who did not know her personally, and were unacquainted with her specific crimes, said there never was smoke without fire, and that Mrs. Primrose would not be so generally disliked if there were not good cause for it. All the country-side heard and spoke of her with raised eyebrows, with meaning smiles, with despondent shakes of the head. Even the bishop, in his episcopal mansion hundreds of miles off, sighed, and wondered what he should do with poor young Primrose; how he could reconcile it with his conscience to afflict any parish with such an incubus as that unfortunate wife—whom he had never seen, but who, he was told on the best authority, was a dissolute and godless woman, who drank.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTERVIEW any of the leading families of Wooroona at this day, and they will tell you that Mrs. Primrose, even *as* Mrs. Primrose, was an angel in human shape. But in the days that followed the Darriwell ball, and all through the summer and autumn until the middle of the winter afterwards, they regarded her as a near connection of the Evil One, and treated her accordingly.

This was the only dark patch—other than the shadow of death, which falls upon us all—on the web of that bright life. Ever afterwards it stood out upon the piece like a blot of ink on pink satin. For Nancy's enemies did not leave her in doubt as to the nature of the charges they preferred against her; and, though she was very dull of comprehension at first, when she did understand the meaning of their dark hints and strange actions, she was stricken with shame and pain to her heart's core. She was punished as completely as they could have desired. They would have had some mercy, being

fairly good-natured women when their better feelings were appealed to, had she shown how deeply she felt her hurt—had she humbled herself, in short, to admit defeat; but this she would not do, by any means. She was a little person of spirit and temper, and she behaved as such. She gave pieces of her mind to them as occasion offered; she contemned their vulgarity, their coarseness, their small-mindedness, all the unladylike vices that they were certain they did not possess, in terse and vigorous language that was not easily forgotten, and that could not be remembered without a sting. She walked about disdainfully, with her head in the air; she still came to church in the most charming dresses—as winter approached, in a real and lovely sealskin jacket; and, while she coolly regarded the ladies between the eyes or over the tops of their bonnets, she smiled—gravely, it is true, but with unabated friendliness—full in the faces of the men when they took off their hats to her. Consequently the ladies hated her without scruple, and persecuted her without remorse. Nothing else was to be expected.

But, though she kept so brave a front to the foe, she bled inwardly, in a way they had no idea of. She could have borne some of the affronts that were put upon her without serious suffering.

The story that she "took too much"—originated by Mrs. Brown in the Darriwell ball-room, but nevermore to die out while the name of Primrose was remembered—made her angry enough, but also amused her mightily; and the accusation of being irreligious she considered, or said she considered, rather a compliment than otherwise, coming from a lot of such self-righteous Pharisees. But the scandal that was more peculiarly scandalous—the deadly arrow that a woman's hand can speed so well, and which always makes its worst wound in the healthiest flesh—went home to the quick, and festered and rankled night and day, poisoning all her peace. She was a little flirt, no doubt, but was made so by Nature and not by art, and meant no harm by her conscious fascinations and unconscious blandishments; she now tasted the fruit of the tree of vicious knowledge for the first time in her life, and it disagreed with her terribly. Not only was she overwhelmed with the wrong that was done her; she had no wholesome trust in herself any more. Men were no longer the pleasant comrades they had been; she smiled at them still, because she could not help it, but she shrank from them too. All her intercourse with them and with the world was spoiled, *and the flavour of life was taken away.*

Added to this trouble, which fretted the colour from her cheeks and the flesh from her bones, was another, no less active in its ill effects. She did not suffer alone; her dear Jack was a vicarious victim, in spite of her assertion that he could never be made accountable for her misdeeds. When she said that, she didn't know what she was talking about. He was as devoted to her as ever, and as inordinately proud of her; he never saw a fault in her, nor supposed that any one else did or could, and Nancy was incapable of the cruelty of opening his dull eyes merely to have the comfort of his sympathetic indignation. His reading of the situation was, that colonial people were different from English people, the two being unfitted to get on together, and that Mrs. Brown was a more than ordinarily pronounced specimen of the typical incumbent's wife. If he had any clearer insight into the state of things, he did not acknowledge it. But it was plain to him, and to everybody, that he did not "get on." Nobody fraternised with him, nobody courted him; he plodded through his work without encouragement and without enthusiasm, and every time he sought change and preferment he was unsuccessful—churchwardens and vestrymen and leading families declining him with thanks *on behalf* of their respective parishes. They did

not give the reason publicly, but everybody knew it except himself. Nancy knew it, for there were plenty of hints in the air which she could understand, if he could not; and she suffered accordingly, sometimes raging in futile wrath against her and her dear Jack's enemies, and sometimes blaming herself heartbrokenly for not being what a minister's wife should be, and having thereby caused all their joint misfortunes.

In short, she fell upon evil days—largely by her own fault, as the virtuous reader will not fail to point out; they lasted in grey uniformity through nearly all her first year of married life, and then it seemed to her that the last gleam of light was quenched out of the world, and that she and happiness bade good-bye forever.

Jack got wet through one stormy Sunday night, when riding home, fagged and weary, from his bush services; caught a severe cold that he could not get rid of; was laid up for a few weeks; and suddenly, just when Nancy thought he was beginning to get over it, took a bad turn, and died. People had grown accustomed to his fragile looks and his constant cough; they regarded his frequent colds—for he always called them colds—as incidental to winter weather and the habits of his profession. Seeing him constantly, they did not mark the grad-

ual fining away of flesh and gradual increase of hectic colour, the lower and lower droop of narrow shoulders, the deeper and deeper hollowing of bony temples and eye-sockets; and when they heard, a week after his wetting and a month before his death, that he was confined to the house, unable to take duty as usual, they were sorry, but not anxious, and certainly not alarmed. They said he never would take proper care of himself, and that he ought not to have ridden home in the rain; he should have stayed where he was till morning; and they further said, that it was all the fault of that little minx, who demanded his return every night for her own satisfaction, and never thought of the unnecessary fatigues that she laid upon him. So that it was a painful surprise and shock to them to find, a few days later, that his case was considered serious; and its subsequent termination filled them with genuine grief.

Nancy cared no more what the old cats said or did; and they simultaneously ceased to be old cats and to say or do anything that was not as kind as kind could be. As soon as they realised that she was in trouble by "the visitation of God"—against which power, so called, all human creatures band themselves by instinct—they forgave her everything upon the spot. Envy, hatred, malice, and

uncharitableness vanished into thin air, till not a trace remained.

On the Sunday of the curate's first absence from church Dr. and Mrs. Lloyd returned home from evening service to find Mrs. Primrose in their sitting-room, impatiently marching up and down. She had on an ordinary house dress and a garden hat, no gloves, no sealskin jacket—only an old woollen comforter of Jack's to protect her from the outdoor cold; and her eyes were red and sodden with still welling tears. The sight struck them with dismay and remorse. They made inarticulate ejaculations as they hurried to greet her.

"Oh, please, please, will you come and see him?" she cried, as soon as the doctor appeared. "He is so ill! He says he is not, but I know he is. He has a horrible pain that won't let him breathe properly, and for two nights he has had no sleep. I can't bear to see him going on like that and getting no better. It breaks my heart. Do, do come and do something for him!"

"Why didn't you send for me before?" asked the doctor, looking at her with both friendly and professional eyes, noting everything at a glance. She was worn and pale, wanting the pretty bloom and brightness that were her special graces; but he thought *her*, in her wifely love and grief, more

charming than ever. "You have not been taking care of your health," he said, quickly. "You will make yourself ill, if you don't mind."

"Never mind me," said Nancy, impatiently. "It is him we must think of. I am all right—I always am."

"You should not have come out in those thin shoes, with the roads as damp as they are. We shall have you laid up to a dead certainty, if you are not more careful." This seemed to him a far more serious misfortune than anything that could happen to Jack.

"Never mind," she repeated. "Will you come and see him now, Dr. Lloyd? He would not give me leave to call you in before."

"Certainly, certainly," he responded; "when I have got you a glass of wine, and something more to put on." He whispered to his wife, who nodded, and flashed out of the room, and swiftly returned with a fur-lined cloak and a pair of goloshes.

And did Mrs. Lloyd object to see her husband lavishing these attentions upon Mrs. Primrose?—to see him preparing to depart with her alone into the dark night? Not at all. She took the cold hands of her rival, and rubbed them with remorseful caresses.

"You poor, poor little thing!" she murmured,

compassionately. "You have been in all this trouble, and we have known nothing about it, and have not been near you to help you! What a set of hard-hearted wretches you must think us! But, indeed, I had no idea that your husband was really ill; I should have come to you at once if I had.—Go with her, Thomas—go and see how he is, and come and tell me.—And if you want any one to sit up with you, dear, let me know, and I will come so gladly. I will come, in any case, the first thing in the morning. You poor dear, you don't know how grieved I am for you—how ashamed I feel of having neglected you so long!"

The little minx had a warm heart and a generous if hasty temper, and she responded promptly to this overture for peace. The doctor had the ineffable satisfaction of witnessing her and his wife fall into each other's arms, and exchange kisses that were almost fierce in their silent ardour.

Then he took Mrs. Primrose home, having tenderly wrapped her in his wife's best cloak, and gone down on his knees to adjust the goloshes; and Mrs. Lloyd, standing on the doorstep to see them go, exhorted him once more to do all he could to help the poor young things in their trouble.

The doctor said he would, and he did. He made poultices with his own hands, put them on, and sat by the bedside to watch their effect. It was about two in the morning when he returned home; and when he told his wife, who sat up for him, that, owing to these extraordinary measures, the poor curate was now easier, and would probably pull through if great care was taken of him, she said that words couldn't express how relieved she was to hear it, and she praised him for what he had done, and encouraged him to continue.

So the ban was removed—for all the Wooroona ladies felt as Mrs. Lloyd did, when the state of things was known—and Nancy found friends cropping up on every side, like mushrooms after an April rain. She saw, heard, and felt them, whichever way she turned; indeed, she was overwhelmed with kindness. Mrs. Lloyd left her precious baby to a nurse-maid while she spent whole days and nights in the sick-room. Hetty Hardcastle and Miss Debenham, and Mrs. Arnold and Mrs. Grimshaw, trotted to and from the curate's cottage at all hours, carrying broths and jellies and flowers, and everything in the shape of an offering that they could think of, displaying the most touching anxiety to make themselves of use. Grace and Lottie Brown brought daily messages of advice

and their mother, who only did not come herself because she had not been paid the compliment of being asked, her dignity requiring the observance of that little formality; and "kind inquiries," accompanied by notes of condolence and encouragement, kept Joanna continually running to the door.

As for the men, of course they were not wanting in fitting attentions at such a time. The two doctors, neither of whom intended to take a farthing fee for his trouble, were in and out at the shortest intervals, and certainly attended to poor Jack in a way that should have kept him from dying, had he had any chance to live. Colin Mackenzie came daily to see and sit with his old friend, and to search for any chink of an opportunity into which he could thrust his hand, full of influence and money, to contrive a lightening of the trouble that he could not take away. The archdeacon was always calling on his way somewhere—"happening to look in"—to see how things were going on, and to impress upon Nancy that she was not to let Jack worry himself about parish matters; which was his idea, and a very good one too, of cheering nurse and patient; while the bankers and lawyers, who were shy of appearing in person lest they should seem to be troublesome, asked twenty

times a day, of everybody they met in the street, how the curate was doing, and fifty times a day how poor little Mrs. Primrose was keeping up. In short, they were as devoted as they had always been, the only difference being that now they could say and do what they liked on that little woman's behalf, and no other woman objected.

And so Nancy found herself surrounded on all sides by helping hands and sympathetic hearts, motherly bosoms on which to lie and weep, thoughtful heads to plan, and willing feet and fingers to execute, whatever might conduce to her sick husband's comfort, and thereby to her own; insomuch that her soul melted within her for gratitude, and she declared once more that there never were such kind people in the whole world as the Wooroona people.

But Jack died, all the same. One day he pulled himself up in bed, as if new strength had come to him, and said that he desired above all things a mutton chop and a glass of English ale. Nancy, wild with hope and joy, ran to the butcher's to select the primest bit of meat he had, and was delicately grilling it over a clear fire, when Mrs. Grimshaw called for brandy in its place. There was a note in her voice that caused the young cook to dash down her gridiron just as the chop

was done to a turn, and flying up-stairs, she found their dear charge speechless in a sudden collapse, from which he had no further power to rally. They gave him brandy, and the doctors came and gave him some more. When it began to trickle out of his mouth instead of down his throat, they urged Nancy to go away—to go to bed—to go anywhere—as if *that* were a matter of life and death; and their hearts were wrung by her refusal and its consequences to her as no sufferings of the dying man could wring them. They sent for the archdeacon, who came at a run, and tried to soothe her sobs and drown the sound of her husband's rattling breath in prayer.

“‘We humbly commend the soul of this thy servant, our dear brother, into thy hands. . . . Wash it, we pray thee, in the blood of that immaculate Lamb that was slain to take away the sins of the world; that whatsoever defilements it may have contracted in the midst of this miserable and naughty world, through the lusts of the flesh or the wiles of Satan, being purged and done away, it may be presented pure and without spot before thee. And teach us who survive’—”

His sonorous voice broke, and trembled away into the silence that here fell upon them all. No

sound came from the bed now—only a wail from Nancy, who knew that her Jack was gone.

“Oh, I don’t want to survive—I don’t want to live—I want to go with him!” she cried; and it was quite true. That was really all she did want.

The archdeacon turned, and folded her in his arms.

“My dear—my dear, dear child—as a father, my love—lay your head on me—it is God’s will—”

He blubbered with emotion. But the doctors looked on sternly. They had quite other views as to how the bereaved one should be approached.

“Let her alone,” said Dr. Debenham, coming round to the side of the bed by which she knelt. “Don’t upset her more than she is already.—Dear Mrs. Primrose, come with me; come where you can be quiet, away from everybody.”

He stooped to raise her from her attitude of despair, and as he did so the thought came into his mind—he tried not to admit it, but could not keep it out—that now she was free, and there was a chance for him. He too was free. The archdeacon and Lloyd were not.

Dr. Lloyd thrust him aside rudely.

“It is not for rough men like us to meddle,” said he. “My wife is here. Let my wife take charge of her.”

And Mrs. Lloyd came and bore Nancy away
n her dead husband, and put her to bed.

"Oh, if I c^duld have died for him!" was Nan-
s heart-broken lament. "If I could but die
/ him! What is life worth to me, now that
is gone?"

In after-days the ladies of Wooroona recalled
ese words, in order to show what a little minx
Mrs. Primrose was—pretending that her husband
was all in all, when, in point of fact—

However, Nancy uttered them in all sincerity.
No woman ever mourned her lost mate with more
absolute regret and grief—until time, and other
things, consoled her.

CHAPTER IX.

It is needless to describe the consternation of the parish when its morning milkman disseminated the news that the curate had died in the night leaving his interesting young wife a widow.

A widow! That gay and girlish creature from the highest to the lowest—from Mrs. Brown to the woman who swept the church—every female heart was touched, every imagination shocked, by the pathetic circumstance. They thought of her in her crape gown and cap, and wept. Then they went to see her, to advise about material and dress makers, to sew, and run errands for her, to coax her to eat and drink, to do everything they could think of to show how sorry and how sympathetic they were. Even Mrs. Brown, forgetting dignity and her ancient wrongs, went forth to condole with the fallen enemy, full of maternal impulses and that sense of duty which distinguished her.

When she found the other ladies usurping the office of confidential friend, she was nasty to them.

She said she hoped they would forgive her if she pointed out that this was no time to worry the poor girl with fussy attentions, which, though doubtless meant kindly, could only distress and disturb her. And, having got them out of the house, she sat down by Nancy's side, and preached and prosed, for hours at a stretch, in a way only to be borne by one to whom a little misery more or less was of no consequence in so vast a grief.

Nancy was "proper" now, if she had never been so before; she fulfilled her social and domestic obligations nobly. This was a satisfaction to Mrs. Brown. But when the funeral was over, and a Christian resignation required, it became a grievance to that lady that the young widow could not be prevailed on to leave off crying. Proper feeling was all very well, said Mrs. Brown, but this extravagant self-indulgence was sinful. She told Nancy so.

"I can't help it," wailed Nancy. "When I look round on this dear little home, where we were so happy together—"

She cast her heavy eyes upon the curate's chair and the table where he used to write his sermons, and sobbed afresh.

"You must not remain here," said the arch-deacon's wife, "where everything about you re-

minds you of your loss. You must come to us, my dear. I have a room ready for you—a room with a fireplace—and you must take shelter under my wing until we hear from your father.”

This was an offer that Nancy had received a dozen times. Every house in the parish would have been her home, had she chosen to make it so. But she refused them all.

“No, no,” she cried. “It is very kind of you, but I can’t go away. It is here that we lived together—I seem to see his dear face at every turn. Oh, what shall I do without him? What shall I do?”

“You must try to combat this morbid feeling,” said Mrs. Brown; and she proceeded to aid her in that direction with all the arguments at her command. “You must see, my love, that, apart from what you wish and what you don’t wish, it is not *right* for so young a woman as you to be alone.”

“Joanna keeps me company,” said Nancy, “and everybody is so kind, coming in to sit with me.”

“Besides, it would be too expensive, keeping the house on now. As your poor husband has left you so little, you must think of that. Of course, you will be going home to your father as soon as he sends us word about arrangements; but in the

meantime I should economise, if I were you. I speak for your good, my dear."

"The house won't cost much," said Nancy. "I have enough to keep myself for a little while; Mr. Hardcastle says so. He advises me to stay here, if I like that best."

"What business is it of Mr. Hardcastle's, I should like to know?"

"He is managing my affairs for me."

"You should have put them into the arch-deacon's hands. *He* was the proper person. Indeed, he has written to your father to tell him that we shall take charge of you until you are sent for."

"He is very kind. But I shall not be sent for."

"*What?*" Mrs. Brown was unpleasantly surprised. She divined that here was something that had probably been confided to Mrs. Lloyd and Mrs. Grimshaw, and withheld from her, who should have been the first to know it.

"I shall not be going home yet," said Nancy. "That's one reason why I don't want to give up the house."

"Not going home!" echoed Mrs. Brown; "and why not?"

"Well, at least I must wait till I hear from my father, and see what he says."

"Of course. But he will be sure to tell you to come home. He will expect you to do that at once, as a matter of course."

"I think not, Mrs. Brown. You see, my brother Frank was coming out in a few months, and they depended on my being here to look after him."

"But they will not send him now."

"They may. I will wait and see. I feel at home in Wooroona now; I would as soon stay awhile as not. And I may be of use to Frank, though I am of no use now to any one else." This with a gush of tears, and an intimation that her head ached too badly to talk any more.

So she stayed—stayed in Wooroona, and stayed in the miller's little cottage, which she now held at a lower rent than ever. And she had so many presents of vegetables, fowls, young pork, new-laid eggs, hares, wild ducks, oysters, cream-cheeses, butter, cakes, new potatoes, and so on and so on, that the expenses of her housekeeping were but trifling.

Her friends, that were her former enemies, went to see her daily; sat with her, slept with her, took her out for walks and drives. They called her Nancy, with tender prefixes, and—and, in short, determined that Brother Frank should not have to

complain of them when he came to hear the history of her early widowed days. Of course, she looked utterly lovely in her black gown and widow's bonnet—nothing out of the bridal trousseau had so cruelly become her; but she was forgiven that, for the sake of the pale and changed little face that accompanied them—a face at which the men gazed with hearts that bled for her, with a reverential admiration that was now too deep for words.

They, as it is needless to state, were her fathers and brothers at the very, very least. She was the sacred charge of them all, individually and collectively, and each one vied with the others in his efforts to befriend her and to stand first in her regard. They took care of her husband's papers and posthumous business affairs; they bullied tradesmen (who never dreamed of bullying her) on her behalf; with an almost passionate jealousy they guarded her most trivial worldly interests, shielding her from all contact with the practical inconveniences of her position. They even went so far as to refrain from calling upon her—save in the company of female relatives—lest through them the faintest breath of village scandal should again harm her name and peace.

Time went on, and did for her what time always does, save in abnormally obstinate cases. She left

off crying by degrees ; she ate the nice things that were sent to her, in gratitude to the senders ; she allowed herself to be persuaded to go to the houses of her friends, and to take a quiet part in the social affairs of the parish. Then her brother Frank came out, and this brightened her so much that even her merry laugh was heard once more.

She had been a girl devoted to brothers, before becoming a wife devoted to an all-absorbing husband, and Frank had been her favourite. He was a nice, wholesome, light-hearted fellow, not more than five-and-twenty, sufficiently good-looking, and qualified to begin the world on his own account as soon as he could find a practice to suit him. Like every other man, he was an ardent admirer of his pretty sister, and he made no secret of his cheerful acquiescence in the decrees of Providence which had so ordered things as to leave her at liberty to keep house for him.

Wooroona society, having received him with enthusiasm, prepared itself to lose him immediately, and with him that charming housekeeper. But he had scarcely arrived when Dr. Lloyd was offered a fine appointment in Melbourne—a post that his wife would on no account permit him to refuse ; and Dr. Debenham prevailed on the young man to step into Lloyd's cast-off shoes.

"It would be so pleasant," said Dr. Debenham, "for me to have a colleague in the place who was also a personal friend."

"It would be awfully nice for me to stay here," said Frank, feeling sure of doing well amongst such hospitable people. "And nice for poor Nan too. I'll see what she says."

Nancy said she would far rather remain where she was than go amongst strangers, and then he came to terms with Dr. Lloyd. When his advertisement appeared in the local paper, and that of the miller calling for tenders for the erection of consulting-rooms, Wooroona, male and female, was delighted. Later on, it transpired that Mr. Lawrence was engaged to a girl at home, and some complaints were made that two young doctors together, one of them little more than a boy, did not meet the requirements of a town of such importance.

There is a dark lining to every silver cloud, and this present world is a world of disappointments. It is likewise hopeless to expect a leopard to change his spots, or that a silk purse can be made out of a sow's ear. These were some of the moral reflections that occurred to the Wooroona ladies at about this time, as they watched the building of the consulting-rooms, the ampler furnishing of the at-

tached house, and its daily growing attractiveness as a social rival to the club.

For now did Nancy begin to expand afresh, like a young tree in spring comes. Now did she again win from herself the sympathy, affection, and respect of her best friends, by a retirement from assembly and unwomanly habits which had so grievously grieved them so much. To imagine Mrs. Brown's sensation on all on Mrs. Grimshaw one day, sitting as a widow in the garden, playing tennis to her might, in a white frock trimmed with lace—not a rag of decency on her save a black sash, which went for nothing, since it could be worn out of mourning as well as in—and with three gentlemen in the set, Dr. Debenham, Mr. Grimshaw, and Mr. Simpson, the new curate. It was only the first summer after her husband's death—though not far from autumn now.

"She said she could not stand the hot black any longer in this weather," said Mrs. Grimshaw, with a smile and sigh. "I believe she hasn't worn it at home for a long time. She is very peculiar in some things."

"Peculiar!" exclaimed Mrs. Brown, with a snort. "She is a heartless little minx!"

"Oh, I don't think she's exactly heartless, dear

Mrs. Brown. She certainly was very much cut up at first. However"—glancing out of the window—"she seems very cheerful now."

"She does, indeed! How long is it, Mrs. Lloyd?"

"About nine months—not more. I didn't think it was so much till I counted it up. It seems like yesterday."

"Just what I expected," said Mrs. Brown, when she returned home to her archdeacon—"just what I expected from the first. This is why she stayed in Wooroona! This is why she tied her bonnet with tulle strings, and took off the veil behind! This is why she wouldn't go home to her mother—as any other daughter would have done, left as she was!" Mrs. Brown stamped about the room, trembling. "Imagine our Grace and Lottie, in such a position, not coming home to *me*! Dear girls, they would have flown on the wings of the wind—express trains could not have brought them fast enough."

"My dear," interposed the archdeacon, "in the letter that her father wrote to me he praised her for waiting for her brother; he said she had acted wisely and unselfishly. Those were his very words—I can show them to *you*."

"Oh, her father—her father! We all know

what fathers are," Mrs. Brown retorted, with contempt.

"Any one could see," he went on, "that she was too miserable to think of making plans for herself. She was just heart-broken, poor little soul!"

"A fig for her broken heart! You should have seen her scampering about that lawn this afternoon, with her dress all covered with frills and lace—white lace—and this only the ninth month!"

"It was one she had by her, I suppose. She didn't have it made on purpose."

"To think," said Mrs. Brown, regardless of the charitable suggestion—"to think of that poor, dear, good fellow, not cold in his coffin—not even laid in his grave—before she was scheming to supplant him with another!"

"*Maria!* My good soul, what—what—what the deuce are you talking about?" cried the shocked listener, too indignant to care how he expressed himself.

His wife paused in her ramping stride and looked at him sternly.

"Josiah," said she, "you forget yourself. You forget your sacred office, and you forget that you are speaking to me. Is *that* a way for a clergyman, let alone an archdeacon, to talk? What can

expect of your people—how can you imagine that your sermons will benefit them—if you don't practise what you preach and set them a good example?"

"Oh, *damn* it!" muttered the archdeacon.

Yes, that was the very word he used; but I don't know that he ever used it except that once. When she fully realised what he had done, Mrs. Brown walked out of the room, and would not speak to him again that day.

Conjugal communication was restored next morning, while the archdeacon was shaving; and the first thing she did was to justify her assertion that Nancy had remained in Wooroona, which was full of her lovers, in order that she might marry again without loss of time. Whereby she caused her husband to cut his chin, which was a thing he had not done for years.

"Look at Dr. Lloyd," she said, flinging out her hand, palm upwards, in a manner that was terribly convincing. "His poor wife not six months dead"—Mrs. Lloyd had died in her second confinement soon after leaving Wooroona—"and those helpless babes depending on him. Why, I ask you, is he always coming up from Melbourne, pretending that he has business here, when everybody knows that he has none whatever—except to dan-

gle after her? I call it disgusting. Nay, it is worse than that. If he had cared to preserve that poor creature's life, she might have been alive now."

"Maria," said the archdeacon, whose hand had begun to shake, though he had not yet wounded himself, "some of these days you will be prosecuted for libel, as sure as you're a woman."

"Look at Dr. Debenham," she continued, unabashed. "Did you ever hear of two medical men, practising in the same place, being friends with one another? Go to his house when you will, morning, noon, or night, and the servant will tell you he is not at home; and, if you ask where he is, she will say, 'At Dr. Lawrence's.'"

"My dear, not always."

"*Always*, Josiah."

"He has a considerable practice," said the archdeacon. "So has Lawrence. They cannot have much time for visiting each other, however much they might desire it. And in point of fact, my dear, I happen to know that they are not at all such intimate friends as you suppose. Lawrence is very particular about men coming to the house—and quite right, too."

"Of course," said Mrs. Brown, sweetly. "We all know that. It is not by *his* invitation that Dr.

Debenham goes and lives there, as he does. They watch and wait until he is out of the way—”

It was at this point that the archdeacon cut his chin. The idea of Debenham and Mrs. Primrose conspiring together to meet and make love behind the brother's back was such a shock to him that he lost nerve for the moment—a thing the most temperate and careful man cannot afford to do while shaving.

Mrs. Brown paused to plaster him. The operation took some time, and gave him hopes that a painful controversy was at an end. But she had not done yet.

“Look at Mr. Prendergast,” she urged. “Why has he given up the school and taken to loaf about on Sunday afternoons—he that used to be so good, and so steady, and so devoted to his religious duties? I hear he has taken to drinking, and I am not surprised. It is nothing but whisky, whisky, whisky, all day long at Lawrence's house—they get it by the gallon jar; two young people, mere boy and girl, who should not know what the taste of whisky is.”

“They keep it for their friends,” pleaded the archdeacon, who had had many a tumbler of it. “And it's cheaper to buy it by the gallon, my dear—far cheaper.”

"Look at Mr. Simpson," she continued, unappeased. "When he first came, no one could have promised better. I did really think we had got the right man in the right place at last—though, to do poor Primrose justice, he would have been quite as useful had he not been demoralised and ruined by his marriage with that woman. And how is it now? Instead of visiting the sick, as he should be doing of an afternoon, there he is, in his shirt-sleeves, playing tennis with Mrs. Primrose! You ought to speak to him, Josiah, and tell him how unseemly it is for a clergyman to indulge in those worldly amusements. His infatuation leads him to forget that."

"They all do it," said Josiah. "It is the custom of the clergy to play tennis—even the dignitaries of the Church, my dear; you will gather that from *Punch*. Tennis and cricket—they are always proper. A man must have exercise, you know, even if he is a parson. I'm sure I wish I could do it. There's nothing like tennis, they tell me, for keeping down fat."

"A clergyman who does his work as it ought to be done gets quite as much exercise as his health requires—and more."

"Come, come, you mustn't be hard on poor Simpson. He is really a most devoted young man

—works early and late, and never spares himself, as you know quite well.”

“He is far more devoted to Mrs. Primrose than he is to the church.”

“Oh, but Mrs. Primrose *is* the church, to a certain extent. Don’t laugh in that stupid way—you know what I mean! If no longer our curate’s wife, she is still one of our best parishioners: always ready to help a deserving case—never grudges time and trouble, nor money either.”

“Where does she get that money from?” Mrs. Brown inquired, darkly.

“From her own pocket, and from her brother’s pocket—where else should she get it from? They are generosity itself, both of them. And regular at church—at least she is; he, of course, cannot come regularly, if he would. Once every Sunday, and generally twice, she comes, as you know, Maria; and that is an example to the parish that we should be very unwise to discourage.”

“And what does she come to church for?” demanded Mrs. Brown, in triumph. “What do they all come to church for? Those young bank clerks and fellows who never used to come, and now take sittings and attend so punctually, looking as pious as you please—do you really flatter yourself, Josiah, that they come to listen to *you*?”

The archdeacon wiped his razor, polished it, and laid it in its case; and he asked, in a wearied tone, if it wasn't nearly breakfast-time. Like a good many Australian husbands, even in his exalted position, he had no dressing-room of his own, and the family circle was his only refuge.

The fact was that, as Nancy's advocate, he had a poor case, and was as well aware of it as Mrs. Brown herself. It was too true that the little minx was besieged with lovers—all those men who had been mentioned, and more besides—who were no longer distant worshippers of her appropriated charms, but suitors confessed in their own persons. And, though she kept them at arm's length, that was as much as she did; they buzzed round her continually like a swarm of bees, and she let them do it—made herself charming, in short, in the old irresistible manner, though she must have foreseen the consequences.

By-and-by Colin Mackenzie came back. He had gone away from Darriwell for a time, simply because he could not trust himself to observe the proprieties if he stayed at home—the proprieties being very sacred to so exemplary a man. And about a week after his return, Mrs. Brown, who had interpreted his absence to mean a desire to preserve himself from the octopus in their midst—

it being a very different thing, she said, to pay kind attentions to a curate's wife, and to continue the same after she was a widow—burst into her parsonage like a gale of wind, threw herself upon her bed, and went off into hysterics.

"The little wretch—the little *toad*—the little CAT!" she hissed through her clenched teeth (if she hadn't been a very religious woman she would have used bad language, like the archdeacon). "So this is her game, is it? She has been waiting for *him*! Oh, thank God, my children are not made of that sort of stuff!" And here she wept. "I have at least that consolation, Josiah!"

And when the archdeacon, having sponged her face and administered brandy and water and the smelling-bottle, asked her what had happened, it transpired that Mr. Mackenzie had been seen out driving in his single buggy with Mrs. Primrose by his side.

The instinct of the woman and the mother was not at fault. Her worst fears were realised. Nancy had been a widow for a year and a month, and not a day longer, when she wrote to her family to tell them she was going to marry again.

"I know you think, dears, that I am a perfect wretch," she said, "but when you know my Colin you will forgive me. He is so good, and so fond



of me, and, oh, when you have been used to having a dear husband to take care of you, you don't know how dreadful it is to be without one! Frank is a darling, of course; but he is so often out, and when he is at home he is thinking about Bessie, and writing to her; and I am sure he wants to get married himself—of course he does, poor boy!—everybody does. No one is the same as one's own own."

CHAPTER X.

MRS. PRIMROSE, the curate's wife, became Mrs. Mackenzie and a great lady. And to say that this was a shock to the moral sense of the parish is to feebly express its sentiments.

Mrs. Brown had many sympathisers. They talked together over their teacups, and said how shocking it was that one so young should be so hopelessly depraved—marrying for money and social position in that brazen-faced manner, ere her first husband was cold in his grave (for it took a long time for one to grow cold in one's grave in those days). And when this aspect of the matter had been fully discussed, they comforted themselves with Bible texts. That the righteous should be despised, while the wicked flourished like a green bay-tree, was a divine ordinance which it was not the part of a Christian woman to question. Mrs. Brown said that. The other ladies gave her to understand that they were wholly with her in this view, but behind her back they made friends

of the mammon of unrighteousness, even before the marriage took place.

It was a deep disappointment to them that they were not asked to it. Even the kindly archdeacon expressed himself as hurt, for the same reason. It was a slight to him, he thought, and an unkindness also, not to ask him to perform the ceremony. In this he agreed with Maria, for once, to a certain extent. For the bride and bridegroom stole away to Sydney, the Dennisons of Barwingee having charge of Nancy, and were there united in such a hole-and-corner fashion that the Wooroona people knew nothing of it until the newspapers informed them. Mrs. Brown said it was better so, for the sake of public decency, and that she didn't wonder Mrs. Primrose was afraid to show her face, to publish her shame, in the light of day. But the general feeling of the community was one of sorrowful resentment at being deprived of a distinction that was its due.

"Does she think we are not good enough for her?" was the painful question raised by her proceedings. "Has she become so grand that she doesn't mean to notice us any more?"

They waited until she came home from her honeymoon, and then they went to call on her. Every one of them went to call—even Mrs. Brown.

"For my dear husband's sake," said the archdeacon's wife, "one must not offend a parishioner of Mr. Mackenzie's standing; and we have nothing against *him*, poor fellow." And she took Grace and Lottie with her, because Darriwell was sure to be filled with company now, and it was not right to shut them out from such little society as a country place afforded.

Nancy received them beaming. She had a deal of human nature in her, and the new conditions of intercourse gave her great satisfaction. "How proud she is! What airs she gives herself!" they exclaimed, when they went away; and there might have been some justification for those remarks. She swept about her great rooms as if she had never known small ones in her life. She wore huge diamonds on her fingers, and real lace on a long-tailed tea-gown, as one to the manner born. Mrs. Brown said it was sickening. Nevertheless, they were all pleased when Mrs. Mackenzie returned their calls, and they all went to call again almost immediately.

In fact, they wanted to go to Darriwell much oftener than they did go. A few tennis and dinner parties gave them a keen appetite for her entertainments which she afterwards failed to satisfy. They blamed her for it, of course, putting it down

to "airs." They said her head was so turned with grandeur that nothing under a bishop was good enough.

The bishop, it may be said, had so forgotten all that he had been told about Mrs. Primrose's loose morals and habits of intemperance as to accept her new husband's invitation to stay at Darriwell, instead of at the parsonage, when he came to Woottona for the periodical confirmation. More than that, he treated his hostess in the absurdest manner: hauled her out of her carriage when he drove with her to church, as if she had been the queen; would not go into the parsonage after service for so much as a glass of wine and a biscuit, lest he should keep her and her "munch" waiting. More than that, he went away, at the close of his visitation, to tell his wife at Bishops court that he had never met with a more charming creature.

But it was not because the bishop had turned her head that Nancy began to "snub," as they expressed it, her less distinguished friends. She never thought of snubbing them. It was all her husband's doing.

"Why," he said one day, when he saw her writing invitations, "why do you have those tiresome t the place?"

"It?" she answered, pleasantly. "It

pleases them, and it don't hurt us." She might have said that it pleased her also, for it certainly did. Without being a snob, she found that one of the great delights of wealth was the being able to shed its power and glory over those who had it not—particularly those between whom and her the position had been reversed so recently.

"But it does hurt us," said Colin Mackenzie. "At any rate, it hurts me. I want to have you wholly to myself."

"Selfish boy!" quoth Nancy, with her charming smile. "Are you not having me to yourself all the time, no matter who is here?"

"Not wholly—not all of you. Those people take your attention, and I hate to see you attending to anybody but me. Those Wooroona fellows—of course you could not keep them at a distance when you lived amongst them, but it is different now. They seem to think it is just the same, but it isn't."

"It certainly isn't," laughed Nancy.

"You are too kind to them, darling, and they take advantage of it. We shall never be free of them if you encourage them so much."

Nancy swept her little notes into a heap and tossed them into the waste-paper basket. "Very well, dear," she said, in her sweetly cheerful way.



"You know I don't care about anything except to please you. If you want me all to yourself, you shall certainly have me. I had no idea that you disliked it, or I would not have asked them at all."

If she had married Bluebeard, she would not have looked into the forbidden chamber, and that famous lady-killer would have doted on her to the last. She would have buried him, and not he her. Women might find her stiff-necked, but the man who was her "own own" had only to command, and she obeyed him as if he were the law of Nature incarnate. The result of this tame submission was not to make a tyrant of him, strange to say.

"I am a selfish brute," said Colin, taking her into his arms. "Do have them, my precious one, if it gives you the least little bit of pleasure. It's only that I love you so, that I don't know how to spare a morsel of you to anybody else."

He tried to persuade her to write her notes again, but she would not. And so the Wooroona people were disappointed. They thought they were going to have a summer of garden parties and nice little dinners, if not, perhaps, dances, on moonlight nights; with opportunities for making the acquaintance of other "swell" persons not

otherwise accessible. And suddenly Darriwell seemed barred to them.

But the less they saw of the inside of Nancy's house, the more they knew about it. It was common talk, in no time, that her husband would not let her entertain company, or go into society, because he could not trust her to behave herself with other men. "And no wonder!" said Mrs. Brown. "If he knew as much of her ways as we do—!" etc. Also the interesting fact transpired that Mrs. Mackenzie left all the housekeeping, even to the ordering of the dinner, to Mr. Mackenzie; that she was such a fine lady now that she wouldn't even go into her own kitchen, but spent all her time lying on sofas in satin tea-gowns, reading trashy novels. It was likewise known for a fact that, with all her money and her luxuries, she was an unhappy woman—a mere prisoner in a gilded cage. Going nowhere, seeing nobody, with a husband who would not even let her order the dinner for fear she should not do it right, her lot was anything but an enviable one, in spite of superficial appearances. Grace, engaged to be married to Mr. Simpson, might be thankful for her brighter prospects. *He*, at any rate, would permit his wife to be mistress of her own house, however humble. There were some, however, who

attributed Nancy's pallor and her pensive looks to a sad circumstance that occurred in course of time—the putting away underground of a little scrap of white marble that should have been the inheritor of the Mackenzie wealth, and the absence of any subsequent son and heir to take its place.

"Ah, my dears," said Mrs. Brown, "see how little money can do for us, after all! How thankful I am that *you* never sold yourselves, for filthy lucre, to such misery as hers!"

Nancy's baby, which only lived a day, was not "cold in its grave"—or would not have been, under other circumstances—when her husband took her away to Europe, to see her family, and to travel, and to distract her mind. For, in truth, all Wooroona put together was not so concerned to see her looking pale as he was. Frank Lawrence, now the husband of his Bessie—who had come out to marry him in that unaccountably bold and brazen English way—had recommended his brother-in-law to give Nancy, in her bereavement, the comfort of her mother's sympathy; and had thereby offended his brother-in-law, who said he didn't want anybody to teach him how to take care of his wife.

"My dear wife," said Colin, "has only to express a wish and it is gratified. She could have

gone to see her mother at any moment she desired, but she preferred her own home to any other—and *me*."

But he took Nancy away at once, having his eyes open to the fact that change was what she wanted. And the experiment succeeded perfectly. She came back, in a year's time, blooming as ever—not quite the same as she had been before she lost her baby, for no woman can ever be the same after that experience; but beautiful in recovered health and cheerfulness, and apparently happy with her devoted husband, whose devotion was too obvious to be ignored or explained away. She brought with her numberless gowns and bonnets of maddening costliness and of the latest fashion, such as Wooroona had read of in its Mechanics' Institute (which took the *Queen*), but had never hoped to see. She brought with her, also, a fair sister, Rosamond by name, in whom the neighbourhood became still more deeply interested.

For the sake of the new gowns and the sister, Darriwell broke out in entertainments for a time, to the intense gratification of all who were invited to them. And then what happened? Just what might have been expected, as Mrs. Brown would say. Miss Lawrence, who was a mere ordinary,

plump, healthy, amiable, fairly good-looking girl, had not been in the colony for a month before she carried off one of the best matches in it. The marriage followed almost immediately—just as if, said Mrs. Brown, they were afraid they would lose him if they didn't make haste—and then entertainments ceased. Once more Mr. Mackenzie, like an ogre in a fairy tale, with his captive princess in the tower, or an Eastern potentate, with his favourite behind the curtain, shut up his wife in that great, lonely house, and would not let people come near her, lest they should distract her thoughts from him. Once more Nancy laid upon her poor, long-suffering husband the burden of ordering the dinner and checking the tradesmen's accounts, because she was too lazy and too luxurious to do it herself.

By-and-by, Rosamond, now Mrs. Thomas Ellis and the mother of twins, wrote home for another sister—with the inevitable result. Florence arrived, met a wealthy young Melbourne merchant, conquered him forthwith, and became possessed of a fine house in Toorah and another on Mount Macedon, though she was not nearly so nice or so pretty as Rosamond, and of course had not a penny. It seemed like something in the blood.

"One would really think," said Mrs. Brown,

"that Australian girls were not good enough for Australian men."

The Australian men, other than Nancy's sisters' husbands, said they could quite understand it. It was because the sisters were *her* sisters that they "went off" in this triumphant way. When the something-in-the-blood theory was submitted to them, they said, Yes, no doubt it was so. No one would believe that girls could share her blood without having some of her sweetness with it.

But by this time Mrs. Brown was more reconciled to Fate. Grace was married to Mr. Simpson, and Mr. Simpson was a rising man, likely to be a bishop some day, if not even an archdeacon. Lottie was betrothed to Mr. Prendergast, who had seen the error of his ways, and returned, repentant, to the Sunday-school. He was a reader now, expecting ordination shortly, and sure—quite sure—to distinguish himself above all his fellows, except perhaps Mr. Simpson and his father-in-law, when fairly embarked upon his career. Words could not express her thankfulness, Mrs. Brown said, that her dear ones had escaped the awful fate of falling into the hands of worldlings—gross, brainless, drinking, gambling, so-called gentlemen, with nothing but their vulgar wealth to recommend them. Poor mothers, who could not be on

the spot to see what their girls were doing, little knew what sorrows were being heaped up for their old age; she, by the Divine favour, had been enabled to keep her lambs within the fold, and could count upon a crown of glory for her grey hairs—to seeing her children, and her children's children, all walking in the ways of righteousness and the paths of peace, fellow-heirs with her of those heavenly riches compared with which all the money in the world was dross.

And when some years had passed, with no apparent diminution of Nancy's carnal prosperity, or of that of Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Sheffield her sisters, there befel one day a circumstance which confirmed our moralist in her faith that God was just. It was a thing that she only had expected to happen; everybody else was stunned with surprise.

The day began with a north wind; and even rich people do not find their money of much use to them in a north wind. A big house is of some advantage, but not very much, built, as big houses are in this country, with walls and windows exposed to the dry blast. The Darriwell mansion had been open all night, and shut up a full hour before the red sun rose in the dull grey sky; Colin had seen to that himself, being a careful man. But, in spite of all his precautions, the air at breakfast-

time was faint in the darkened rooms, and nothing would freshen it. Outside, the beautiful gardens were parched, dusty, flowerless, despite half a dozen pumping windmills that had nothing to do but to irrigate them (there being no water for the windmills to pump). Outside these, again, the paddocks were straw-white, like sandy deserts in some parts, looking as if no blade of grass would ever grow on them any more. The poor, lean sheep crowded into the thin shadows under the ragged trees, or stood in dingy masses in the sun, each with his head tucked under his neighbour's body—spectacles of patient misery to make one's heart bleed. It was some small comfort to them that they had been shorn not long ago, for this was a day in January. The drought had been going on since winter.

Colin and Nancy sighed in concert as they sat down to breakfast.

"Look at that dust!" exclaimed the master of the house. "Where *does* it come from?" He passed his napkin over a few polished surfaces, until they shone speckless, as they should do. "Look at that butter!" He took it up to look at it himself. "It has not been kept in the cooler I bought on purpose for it, or it would never be going to oil like this."

"Oh, never mind!" said Nancy, in her soothing voice. "It's too hot to make a fuss, dear. I'm sure I don't know how the poor servants can do their work at all. I couldn't eat butter if it was frozen. I shall have some bread and strawberries. Cut me just a tiny slice of bread."

"Nancy, I must insist on your having something better than bread and fruit. You cannot keep your strength up, in this weather, if you don't eat," said her husband, earnestly. "Just a bit of pigeon's breast out of this pie—come?"

"O Colin!"

"To please me, darling."

"Well—if I must!"

She took a plate of meat from him and did her best to eat it, because it was his wish. He came round the table to pour out tea for her, to save her the trouble, and kissed her for being good; and then sat down in his own place, satisfied.

Two minutes later, while picking the body of the pigeon from which he had stripped the breast for her, he had a sudden shock—a sudden "turn," like a qualm of sickness—a sensation that my bush readers will understand much better than I can describe it. For—miles away, too far for any but a bushman's nose—he thought he smelt the smell of smoke.

"I hope to' God we sha'n't have a fire on such a day as this!" he exclaimed; and he dropped his knife and fork and lifted his head, sniffing eagerly. He was as careful of his lands as he was of his house and furniture, and the dread of a fire had been haunting him for weeks. Needless to say, there were double plough-furrows round all his paddocks; but a wind like this had been known to carry flames over a made road.

"Oh, dear, I hope not!" cried Nancy. She jumped from her chair, threw up blind and window, and stretched out into the furnace heat. "No, Colin. It's all right. It's only the smell of the scorched ground."

But, as she spoke, the parlour maid, who had left the room, came in hastily to confirm her master's fears.

"If you please, sir, George says that there's a fire started over Rosevale way." Rosevale was the home of Nancy's sister Rosamond, about five miles from Darriwell. That is to say, the two houses were that distance apart. The stations joined.

"Tell George," said Mr. Mackenzie, "to send the men away as fast as he can, and to saddle Starlight for me."

And he flung down his napkin, and left his

pigeon and his tea—for no Australian gentleman thinks of eating his meals while his neighbour's land is burning, even when the neighbour is not his brother-in-law.

"Let me ride with you," pleaded Nancy. "Rosamond has never had a fire before, and it will frighten her, perhaps."

"The idea!" ejaculated Colin, horrified. "You just stay quietly in the coolest place you can find, and don't think of putting your little head out-of-doors till the wind changes. Wherever the fire is, it won't come near Rosamond."

Then he went—he and his men, in a great clatter of hoofs and shouts, each in his shirt-sleeves, with his bag on the saddle in front of him; and, when they were all gone and the place was still, Nancy, disobedient for once, ran up-stairs and out, upon the upper balconies, and there stood in the brazen glare and the scorching wind, with a field-glass to her eyes, to watch the fire. Rosamond had a baby less than a week old, which made her anxious about its direction and dimensions. Of her own concern in it she never thought for a moment.

She looked across to Rosevale almost from the back of her own house, which, like the majority of Australian country houses, had been built on low

ground, for the convenience of being near water. Less than a mile away, a little chain of hills, called the "Rises," shut off from her view not the Rosevale lands only, but a large part of her husband's property. In fact, she could see nothing of the field of action, except the sky. But she was so good a bushwoman by this time that she could tell by the look of the sky where the fire was.

At Rosevale certainly, to her keen distress. Just over the fertile flats surrounding Rosamond's pretty home hung that pillar of cloud which is the dreadful feature of a long drought. It rose and sank in vague white puffs on the pallid horizon, spread, and died, and rose again, so that she could not tell for a long time how things were going. Then a taller column suddenly soared into the wind, and when she saw the colour of it her heart began to thump. A man had just ridden into the yard, and she leaned over the balcony to call to him.

"Is it coming our way?"

"Yes'm," he shouted back. "We're afraid of the flat paddocks, with the wind where it is. I just came to warn the cook."

"Oh, poor Colin!" sighed Nancy, as she again put the glasses to her eyes. "What a state of mind he *will*. be in if it gets into the flat paddocks!"

The flat paddocks, also called the fattening paddocks, lying on either side of the Rises, were the cream of the run; there grew the rich grass, which was long even now, though as dry as old hay; and the wind was certainly blowing dead on to them from the Rosevale fire as hard as it could blow.

Down-stairs the cook and her fellow-servants made gallons of tea, as was their duty under the circumstances; Mrs. Towers set out whisky and beer bottles, and dozens of soda water, and all the tumblers that the house could furnish, on convenient tables, in readiness for exhausted men. Up-stairs, Nancy stood on the balcony, her white gown flapping round her like a flag, and watched the approach of the enemy, murmuring under her breath, in a voice full of pity: "Oh, my poor, poor Colin! His *best* grass! What *will* he do?"

The flat paddocks—on the other side of the Rises, at all events—were evidently doomed. The fire, quite out of hand, came sweeping up before the northern blast, having overleaped two at least of the double plough-lines; a wide curtain across the hot, pale sky, drifting off in billowy white cloud at the edges, but every moment growing darker and thicker in the middle—until the grey took a tinge of red on the crest of the Rises, and

she could *feel* the crackle in the air and the roar from the long grass:

"Ah, there they go!" she ejaculated. "Let's hope the hill will stop it, and save the paddocks on this side."

But the smoke grew blacker, and redder, and nearer—so near that it tickled her throat and made her cough; and then a yellow flicker appeared on the top of the hill; and then the fire came pouring over like a water-flood, rolling down all the little gullies in inky streams, edged with that cruel, scintillating orange fringe that had licked up so many miles of sun-parched grass. It was a stirring sight, and all the maids had left the house to see it.

"Oh, my!" they exclaimed to one another, in delicious excitement. "Suppose it comes right down to the house!"

The house was safe, but the near flat paddocks were not—nor, perhaps, the gardens, in that terrific wind. The thought that the gardens might go, too, made Nancy shudder as she stood, for she said to herself that in that case Colin would indeed be heart-broken. But now she could see all that he and the men were doing, which was a great satisfaction to her, and she would know the worst in a few minutes. She counted thirty-seven gallant

men between the top of the Rises and the bottom—contingents from all the stations and selections round—which seemed a force sufficient for any fire that had no timber except fences in it. In knots of two and three they fought, as well as ever soldier fought in battle of another kind, and her heart swelled as she watched them—flapping their bags with might and main, their bodies jerking violently to and fro, and then, one at a time, flinging themselves aside on the ground for a few seconds to recover breath and strength, and resuming the contest with the same tremendous energy. A stable-boy was toiling up the hill with two buckets of tepid tea depending from a yoke over his shoulders, and two more lads strayed about on the higher land, now so black that they were scarcely discernible against it, holding clusters of horses by their bridles, and surveying the proceedings nonchalantly. The station-horses were all quiet, as if quite accustomed to such affairs. Only Starlight, conspicuous in his coat of bright chestnut amongst their dull bays and browns, danced about a little.

The end came in a few minutes—the end of the fire and of the watchers' breathless suspense. The tributaries of the black flood were gradually checked and circumscribed; the main stream

poured down upon the border of the flat paddocks, and stopped there, meeting a strip of burnt ground, the last line of defence, on the edge of the plough-furrow. A cheer went up from the men, and was answered by the women at the house. Nancy shrieked from the balcony, in the hope that her husband might hear her, and then ran down-stairs to see that plenty of refreshment was ready for all who needed it. For him she turned on the bath in a ground-floor bath-room, and carried down fresh linen from his dressing-room, and his brushes and sponges, and all he could want. "For," she thought, "he will be too utterly fagged out—poor fellow!—to walk up-stairs."

Within half an hour the news was broken to her that he would never walk again, either up-stairs or down. That bush-fire killed him. Only those who have fought such a fire know the bursting strain of the effort, and how wonderful it is that nearly all seem to come through it unhurt. What a proof it is of the physical soundness and toughness of our new race, as to which so many opinions are expressed by people who know nothing about it! Colin Mackenzie was not very strong; he had been leading a luxurious, uxorious life of late; he had been desperate at the threatened destruction of his fattening paddocks. So he drew

upon his constitution for more than it was able to pay; tumbled headlong into the black ashes of the extinguished fire, with his bag in his hand; was carried home unconscious, and died while Nancy was frantically telegraphing to Melbourne for doctors and a special train to bring them.

Thus ended her second matrimonial venture—which was not the important episode in her life that she at the time considered it. At the time she felt, even more than she had felt in her first widowhood, that her beloved husband had been her all in all, and that without him she was utterly and irreparably desolate. In fact, she proved the genuineness of her grief by falling into an illness so real and serious that Melbourne doctors were required to come by special trains to deal with it.

All her old friends were very sorry for her—even Mrs. Brown, though that Christian woman could not stifle her honest conviction that it served her right. But when they heard that Mr. Mackenzie had left the whole of his fortune to his wife, and heard what it amounted to, they were not so sorry. They said again that the wicked flourished like a green bay-tree, and things of that sort; and Mrs. Brown was very bitter. Twenty thousand a year or so was, they felt, compensation for anything. And who was she, that she should have

such exasperating luck? Mr. Simpson was not yet a bishop, nor anything near it, and Mr. Prendergast was still a potential rather than an actual success. Grace and Lottie had hard work to make ends meet, and their beautiful children were without the advantages to which their merits and birth entitled them. The poor mother and grandmother gnashed her teeth—and we might have done the same, dear reader, had we been in her place.

But she had one comfort. It presently transpired that Mr. Mackenzie had left his fortune to his wife *conditionally*. If she married again, she was to lose it all—all but a thousand a year, which was comparatively nothing. When this news was brought to her, and duly authenticated, Mrs. Brown was so triumphant that she almost danced for joy.

“*There!*” she exclaimed, “doesn’t *that* show?”

It proved, to her mind, more conclusively than anything had proved it yet, that Nancy was a hopeless person, and that her husband—poor fellow!—had known it well. With all her charm, and all his devotion to her, he did not trust her further than he could see her.

“Thank God,” she said to Josiah, “that *we* were not afflicted with such a daughter! Ah, my dear, virtue is better than riches! Our children

have chosen the better part. No shame like this will ever come to *them*."

To this day she maintains that the little minx was not merely a little minx—something far worse—and quotes her second husband's will to prove it. Far be it from her, she says, to sit in judgment on a sinner who now stands at a higher tribunal, but still, when all is said about poor, dear Mrs. Mackenzie's charming manners and sweet disposition, the fact remains—between you and me, my dear—that she was no better than she should be. Her poor husband knew it, and did his best to protect her against herself—uselessly, as you may have heard. She was an intriguer to the last. Even old age would not have cured her.

*W. H. M.
This story*

CHAPTER XI.

Now, it is a shocking thing to say, I know, but it is nevertheless a fact, that in the world of living men and women this strange thing frequently happens: you may marry the man of your choice (or two men of your choice, or three), and be perfectly devoted to him, without ever knowing what it is to be divinely in love.

Let us put it in another way, less offensive to the conventional public and the orthodox reviewer. In real life the supremely interesting woman is not a girl of eighteen, as she is in fiction. Every man worth calling a man knows that. Pooh! A girl of that age is improving herself under music-masters and such like, and learning from her mother how to sew and to keep house—or she ought to be, since it is the first chance she gets. She knows as much about love as does a young animal in the spring, and not a bit more; and the human male of these days, so highly developed, so subtly compounded, has grown out of the stage when that

much would satisfy him. I mean, of course, the human male who in real life answers to the hero of fiction—a man who must have left not his teens only, but his twenties behind him. Married or single, both must grow and grow, must live every day of their lives, and drink deep of the wells of knowledge, ere they can attain to that experience which makes us gods amongst living things.

Our little minx, who had had lovers by the score, and two of the best of husbands, was thirty-one before she fell in love herself in the true sense of the term. At twenty she had imagined that her heart was buried in Jack Primrose's grave; at twenty-six, that she had finally interred it in that of Colin Mackenzie. But what she called her heart was like an unborn child in their time—growing and growing, ever stronger and completer, ever nearer to the light, but inaccessible to them and an unfathomed mystery to herself. Not until, in the fulness of days, she met the man whom circumstances had qualified to be the right man, did it burst forth and live, understanding that it was alive; and then it had, practically, the accumulated force of a dozen years of unspent passion in it.

On her thirty-first birthday she sighed to think how old she was, and Rosamond Ellis, a year her

junior, did not tell her—what any intelligent person of forty could have done—that she was a lovelier woman than she had ever been, a woman in the summer of her days, in the perfect flower of her life, the potential sovereign of a kingdom far greater than any she had yet ruled over.

That day she spent with her two Australian sisters, the morning with Mrs. Ellis, whose house was her home, the evening with Mrs. Sheffield, who had a large party in her honour, including the captain of a P. & O. steamer that had just arrived in port. In the afternoon she made a luxurious journey with a maid, and a gold-mounted dressing-bag, and so on, reaching Florrie's just in time for dinner, for which she dressed, in honour of the occasion, in about five thousand pounds' worth of diamonds—for she was a lavish little person in those days. Before night she had discovered for herself that she was far from being an old woman, in any sense of the term; and before the next night she was fully awake to the fact that the seventh heaven of human existence was but just opening to her view. Three days later she came home, transfigured, treading upon air. Her sister and brother-in-law could not think what had happened to her. She had received and refused so many handsome offers of marriage, and she had

seemed so sensible in regard to her husband's will, so settled in her determination to remain a widow and preserve her large fortune for her own family, that no suspicion of a love affair occurred to them. They wrote to Florrie, but Florrie had no information to give them, beyond the fact that Nancy had been the most brilliant figure in the birthday party, and really looked quite a girl still, though unmistakably getting on in years.

And Nancy held her tongue; that is to say, she kept her secret for four long months—even from Rosamond. Rosamond used to tell her husband everything, and Tom Ellis was absurdly particular about the connections and antecedents of all who aspired to the hand of his ward. Moreover, Tom and Rosie's children were down in their aunt's will for a sum considerably larger than the capital of a thousand a year amounted to.

But there were times during those four months, especially recent mail times, when she felt that she must talk to somebody or burst. And at last she let herself go.

The sisters were sitting in the hall of Rosamond's house—a spacious hall, with extensive Persian carpets on the parquet floor, and a lovely red-gum fire on the hearth—on a certain afternoon in June; that is to say, one of them was sitting

there. Mrs. Ellis, grown fat, and always tranquil, reclined at ease in a well-cushioned basket-chair, her foot on the fender and a tea-table at her side, placidly knitting a jacket for her sixth baby. Mrs. Mackenzie could not sit still for a moment. She was all the time flitting out to the veranda, and trailing back, and flitting out again, until her restlessness culminated in an outburst of rage.

"Oh, *dash* that idiot of a boy!" she cried, stamping her foot. "Why does Tom keep such a lazy little scamp? He's had time to go to the post and back again fifty times!"

"No, he hasn't," said Rosamond, in her soft, comfortable voice, looking at the clock on the hall mantel-piece. "He is never back before half past four."

"And it's now twenty minutes to five."

"They are always a little later on English mail days. What are you in such a hurry for? Whom do you expect to hear from?"

"Oh, never you mind. When it's time to get one's letters, one ought to get them. I wish I had had North Wind saddled and ridden in myself."

She caught up the tail of her gown—a resplendent yellow satin tea-gown, richly trimmed with brown fur—and ran out of the hall again, hearing a faint sound of hoofs on the soft winter grass.

In two minutes she intercepted the boy at the garden gate, wrested the mail-bag from him, and darted with it into the hall.

Those two minutes had brought in the master of the house from an inspection of poisoned burrows, to look for his newspapers and a cup of tea. He stood in the house-master's attitude before the fire, warming his hands under the skirt of his Norfolk jacket; and he smiled at his sister-in-law as she swept to his side and imperatively held out her hand to him.

"What's the hurry, Nancy?"

"English letters, Tom. Give me the key—quick!"

He took the key from its nail over the mantel-piece, and held out his hand for the bag; but Nancy snatched the key, opened the bag herself, and shook letters and newspapers upon a table. Like a cat springing upon a mouse, she pounced upon one of them, and turned and ran.

"Here, Nancy! Here's two more for you—one from the mater," called Mr. Ellis after her.

"All right. I'll come directly," she called back.

"Let's have tea before we begin to read letters," pleaded Mrs. Ellis, who had only been waiting for her husband to appear before brewing the

cup that her soul desired, and which he deigned to share with her.

Nancy glanced over her shoulder at the still cold teapot and the hissing kettle. "Oh, you haven't made it yet; don't make it for a few minutes," she said. "I'll be down again directly." And she waited for no further remonstrance, but flew up-stairs to her own sitting-room.

Here her maid was putting fresh logs on the fire, and making other preparations for the luxurious hour or two before dinner, which Nancy indulged in while Rosamond was occupied in the nursery. The maid was promptly turned out by her mistress, and the door locked upon her. Then Mrs. Mackenzie knelt down on the hearth-rug, as upon a prayer-carpet, and reverently opened the letter she had brought up from the hall. As she held it and read it, the paper shook and rattled in her hands, her tumultuous bosom heaved and sank, her eyes melted and glowed. To feel that tangible message with her own quick flesh—to read those words that the beloved hand, so great and strong, had penned—merely by these means to touch the living spirit of Love through fourteen thousand miles of post-office—all but suffocated her with joy.

It was not much of a letter, as a letter, and the paper was a business blue sheet, with "Fenchurch

Street, E. C.," printed on the top. Never mind. It was from *him*. And the tables of the law that came down from Sinai were not more sacred. This is how it ran :

"MY LOVE :—When you get this I shall be only a few days from you. We sail on Thursday. You *must* come down to Melbourne to meet me, and be ready to go on to Sydney in the ship. You can do that, can't you? You have friends in Sydney, I am sure, for you have them everywhere. But if not, don't let that stop you. We can't afford to be too particular, situated as we are. But I know it is enough for me to ask you. You will do it if you are alive. You don't shilly-shally about things, like other women. When you love a man, you know it, and you let him know it. I sha'n't forget that last day at the Sheffield's, when we had only ten minutes left—when I went to look for you down the garden, to say good-bye, and found you in the summer-house. My God! not if I lived a thousand years. I have done nothing but rage and froth at the mouth ever since, to think it happened only ten minutes before I had to go, when we had had two whole days together, and the ship was homeward-bound. But we'll make up for what we lost then, and not throw away any more

chances. Be down in Melbourne when we get in, and have a telegram waiting for me to say you'll go on to Sydney.

"And look here, Nancy—when I get you I must keep you. Understand that clearly. I must. I *will*. But I need not use force, need I? You will come to me of your own accord. Yes, I have an easy mind about that—and you won't feel insulted at my saying it, will you, dear? I'm not like other men, who can go and come, and whose time is their own. And you are not one who would go back on those lovely letters, which I have read into rags—not you! *You* wouldn't let a man feel himself loved like that, and then turn round and disappoint him. It would be blasphemy against your true heart to think it. You will be ready to fall in with my plans for our common happiness, won't you? I don't for a moment doubt it.

"So, then, sweet, if it is any way possible—and you can make it possible, I'm sure—you will not only go to Sydney with me, but *to England too*. You are a free woman—what is there to stop you? Tell them you want to see your mother. Tell them anything. Bring your sister or a friend with you, if you think a maid is not enough, but don't let us put the seas between us any more, if we can possibly help it.

"Of course, if you *can't* do this—if you absolutely could not, for some extraordinary reason, go to England straight off, then we will be married the minute we get to Sydney. That would give us three weeks of—I was going to say of heaven, but it's too ridiculously poor a word. Only I couldn't bear to leave you after that—neither of us could bear it—and the Company won't allow its captains to have wives aboard. That is why I want to try to wait till we get home. You can be near me as a passenger; I should at least see you every day. And we could be married the instant we got to London. I don't look further than this at present. I might be able to cut the sea. We can settle all that later. I can think of nothing now but just getting hold of you. Be ready in good time, and don't keep me waiting. I simply *ache* for that next kiss. So do you, unless I'm much mistaken.

"Tell me where you stay in Melbourne, so that I can get to you at once. You will have time to write to Adelaide.

"Yours, body and soul, my queen, for ever and ever,
ROBERT BRACKENBURY."


Over and over and over again the recipient of this characteristic love-letter read it, and kissed it,

and pressed it to her breast. Time flew, as usual, and the patient Rosamond thirsted for her tea and would not take it—though Tom was not allowed to wait for his; and Nancy came not. She had passed away into another world, whose only inhabitants were herself and Robert; and the common earth and all that appertained to it were for the moment shadows—shadows under a vertical sun.

It was falling dark upon the common earth when her maid came to the door to ask her, with Mrs. Ellis's love, whether she would have her tea up-stairs.

"No, Caroline—oh, no! Tell her I will be down in two seconds," she called in reply; and she still remained kneeling before the fire, which lit up her impassioned eyes and her golden robes, and made a beautiful glowing picture of her against the shadows of the room. A quarter of an hour later, Mrs. Ellis herself was tapping at the locked door, crying: "Nancy! Nancy, what *are* you doing? Do let me in!"

Then, at last, Mrs. Mackenzie rose, and thrust her treasure into the pocket of her gown. She ran to admit her sister, whom she clasped impulsively in her arms, being obliged to vent her overflowing emotions somehow.



"Oh, darling, I am so sorry you troubled to come! I *was* going down in a minute. No, I don't want any tea. What! Haven't you had yours? Caroline shall bring it here." She rang for Caroline. "Now, sit down and let me tell you. I ought to have told you before—I don't know why I didn't. Promise me, Rosamond, that you won't breathe a word to Tom—at least, not until I give you leave."

"But what is it, dear?" inquired Rosamond, contentedly sinking into an easy-chair. "You can't have any secrets that you want to keep from *him*."

"Oh, but I have, though! A tremendous secret. Will you promise?"

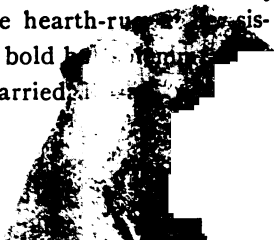
"Must I bind myself? I have never kept anything from him yet. Between husband and wife, you know—"

"Yes, I know. Very well, I won't ask you to bind yourself. I will trust to your honour. And I only want you to keep it from him for a week."

"I dare say I can do that," said Mrs. Ellis, relieved. "Now, what is it? You quite frighten me."

Nancy, squatting on the hearth-rug, by her sister's feet, looked up with a bold but nervous expression.

"I am engaged to be married!"



"What, *again?*" Rosamond was a little shocked by the announcement, but got over it in a moment. "Well, it is only what Tom and Frank have always prophesied. They said you were not the woman to remain single, money or no money."

"They are horrid wretches to say such things. I should have remained single for ever and ever, but for *him*. Tell me, Rosie, you don't care about losing the money, do you, dearest? You are all well off. The chicks won't really need it."

Mrs. Ellis stooped and clasped her sister in her arms. She had the family disposition, which was sound and sweet to the core.

"So long as you are happy, darling—that's all I care about—all any of us will think of. Of course, it's a pity to throw away such a fine property. I'm afraid you will feel the want of it yourself—you are so used to having lots of money, and all that money means—"

"Oh, no! oh, no, no—not a bit of it! I've got what's worth all the money in the wide world."

"Do you feel sure that you really have? Suppose he believes—who is he, by-the-way?—that he is marrying your present fortune?"

Nancy sat on the hearth-rug, with her hands clasped, and her eyes, beamed all over. "He is marrying a woman who is worth all the money in the wide world."

without a penny. Ted Sheffield carefully tells everybody that if I marry again I shall lose everything—he doesn't reckon a thousand a year worth mentioning—and I know he told Robert the first thing. The more a man is interested in me, the more Ted is sure to tell him. Besides, Robert has implied that he told him."

"Robert?" queried Mrs. Ellis, with raised brows.

"Robert Brackenbury—once captain of the *Gibraltar*—now captain of the *Egypt*. P. & O., you know."

"A sailor?" gasped Rosamond. "Is that all?"

"No, that is not all. He's the splendidest man that ever walked this earth!"

"But a sailor!—a P. & O. captain, only!"


"Rosamond, you are not to say 'only,' when you speak of him."

"But who is he, darling? Where does he come from? I never heard his name, even, till this moment. Nor has Tom, I'm sure."

"No, I dare say not. He is Ted Sheffield's friend. I met him when I was there in February—my birthday party, you know. I shall not forget that birthday in a hurry."

"But you were only there for four or five days."

"And he was only there for two."



"And you have never seen him since? You mean to say you took a man you had only known for two days?"

"Oh, no. I had known him before. Years ago we were quite old friends. When I walked into Florrie's drawing-room that night," proceeded Nancy, gazing in rapture at the ceiling, "and saw him standing there, I knew what was going to happen. I knew what we had met for. So did he. Ted had told him that I should be a beggar if I married again, but he never heeded that any more than I did. We were meant for each other, Rosamond—no doubt of that."

"I hope so," said Rosamond, with an anxious sigh. "Still—"

"By good luck, I had put on that beautiful white and silver dress—the prettiest evening dress I ever had—and my diamonds. And I felt very happy, somehow, as if my heart knew that he was there—though I didn't know it. I couldn't have looked better. And he— But you must see him, Rosamond, before you will understand how different from all other men he is."

"Good looks," remarked Mrs. Ellis, "are not enough to marry on."

"I know they are not. They are the very least of the things we have to marry on."



"And money—white and silver dresses—diamonds—"

"Oh, bother dresses and diamonds, and money too! What do I care for any of them, now that I've got him! Only, my diamonds and things made me look like a queen, he said. He has called me his queen ever since. I was glad to come to him like that. And now I am glad to lay down my crown for his sake. I've got a better crown—*his*! My king! my king!"

She spread out her arms, drew them back upon her breast, and dropped her head on her knees, robbing—two or three strange little fluttering sobs, with a hint of hysteria in them. Then she was calm again—resolutely calm.

"Now, Rosamond, let me tell you," she said, taking up the broken tale at a new place. "I have just had a letter from him. He will be here in a week, and I am going to meet him. He asks me, and I must. And I am thinking of—of going on to Sydney with him, Rosamond. I *want* to go to Sydney—I have wanted a long time; this is just the right time of year, and it would do me good. And it is an opportunity. He would take care of me, and we should see something of each other at the same time. We have so few opportunities, that we must take them when they do come."

She said nothing of the larger plan behind. It was too tremendous for her own grasp at present. And the audacity of the immediate enterprise was sufficiently disconcerting to Mrs. Ellis, who did not easily allow herself to be excited or surprised.

"My darling," she protested gently, "wouldn't that be rather—rather—"

"Oh, not rather, Rosamond—very much so. I know that. But I can't help it. We are not situated like other people. We can't afford to be too particular"—quoting her lover, with an ineffable smile.

"Tom will never allow you to go alone," said Mrs. Ellis. "He will insist on escorting you over."

"You must stop him, Rosamond. I am not a girl—he always forgets that. Oh, it is his goodness, I know—he only thinks of my comfort—but he is *too* chivalrous for these days. One wants a little liberty sometimes. You must manage to keep him at home. I shall have Caroline, you know. What's the use of a maid, if she can't take care of you when you travel?"

"*Won't* you let me tell him about it, Nancy? Such an important thing—affecting us all so seriously! I do think he ought to know. I wouldn't

like him to think I had been bamboozling him. Only just now he was speaking of your manner when you brought in the post-bag, and wondering what was in your correspondence to excite you so."

"Was I excited? What an idiot I am! But I was wild to get my letter. Oh, you shall tell him soon, Rosamond—you may tell him directly I am gone. But *not before*. Promise me you won't give him the least hint till I am out of the house. That's all I ask—only till I'm out of the house—and I'll never ask you to keep anything from him again. You know how it would be! He would be wanting all the fatherly ceremonies and conventional nonsense, and I couldn't stand it—I simply couldn't."

"But wouldn't that be right, darling? When you know so little of Captain Brackenbury—"

"I know enough," Nancy interrupted. "Nothing more that anybody could know would make a scrap of difference."

"His family circumstances, dear—his antecedents—we ought to have *some* information—"

Nancy interrupted again by springing to her feet and calling "Come in" to Caroline, who appeared with the tea.

"That's right, Caroline. I was wondering

whether you had forgotten all about us," she cried, in a voice of welcome.

"No, ma'am, certainly not," returned Caroline. "I only waited for a fresh kettle. Tea is no good when it's made of water that's been boiling for hours."

Caroline was a brisk young woman, but it took her some minutes to arrange the table and light the lamps; and her mistress was in a state of nervous tension that made it impossible for her to stand still and watch the process. She paced up and down the room, trailing her shining, furred robes behind her, her spirited, bright-eyed face seeming to flash like her jewelled hands as she turned in the light, every line of her lithe figure showing the consuming energy that possessed her. When tea was made and buttered cakes uncovered, she still roamed hither and thither, taking sips and bites at intervals, and paid no heed to her sister's repeated invitations to sit down and be comfortable. Mrs. Ellis, for her part, ate and drank with composed enjoyment, while still discussing the startling project that had just been confided to her.

Her mental attitude, as always, was one of tender sympathy and placid hopefulness; but she had natural misgivings as to the wisdom of Nancy's

choice and proposed proceedings, which she felt in duty bound to mention. Still, she refrained from dwelling further upon the undisputed fact that they knew nothing of Captain Brackenbury's private means and position; not only because she perceived that no argument of that sort would be entertained for a moment, but because she could not bear to be disagreeable. Instead, she gently pointed out the well-known disadvantages of having a sailor for a husband—as if they had not occurred to Mrs. Mackenzie before.

"Though I see," said Mrs. Ellis, "that you have made up your mind to marry him, in spite of all."

"I am glad you see it," said Nancy, smiling, "for there never was a more certain thing."

"But you know, darling, those great companies have a rule against captains taking their wives on board."

"Yes, I know. Inhuman wretches! What are they made of, I wonder?"

"And, O Nancy, think of being married, and only having your husband for about two months in the year! Why, if Tom is away for a week, I feel lost. So would you. You have no *idea* what it would be."

Her sister stretched her white arms out of her hanging sleeves and clasped her hands behind her

head. The gesture and the expression of her face were eloquent, though she said nothing. She defied Fate and the company to keep her husband from her, once he was her husband.

"However," Mrs. Ellis proceeded, glad to be reconciled on any terms, "we shall get the benefit; for we shall be able to keep you with us, as we couldn't do if you married a landsman. Of course, you will go on living with us; you must have *somebody* to take care of you when he is at sea. You shall have more rooms, Nancy. Tom will build some for you."

"Robert may be able to 'cut' the sea," said Mrs. Mackenzie, loving to quote even his slang words, "and then we can live where we like."

"He will hardly like to live on your money, dearie."

"What does it matter whose money we live on, as long as we can be together?"

"Tom won't take that view, Nancy."

"I don't care what view Tom takes. It's none of his business. I mean, dearest, that in a matter of this kind I *must* please myself."

"And I am not to give him even the least little hint? Not even if I make him promise not to say a word, and keep him from going with you to Sydney?"

"You are *not!*" was the emphatic answer, and Nancy stamped her foot to emphasize it. "If you do, I'll never speak to you again." Then she flung herself on her knees and put her arms round her sister's ample waist. "O Rosie! Rosie!" she cried, clasping and kissing her, "if you only knew—if you could only remotely imagine—how I love him! But you couldn't! Nobody could."

Rosie returned the caress with all the warmth of her kind heart. She felt almost like a mother to this sister older than herself. "Are you really thirty-one?" she laughed. "It's hard to believe it, when you go on like this."

"I'm not," Nancy laughed back, with that fluttering sob at the back of the laugh, "I'm only four months old. I was only born last February."

The nurse came to tell Mrs. Ellis that the baby was weeping for her—as, indeed, could be heard as soon as the door was opened; and crying, "Bless his precious heart!" she hurried away to the nursery. When she was gone, Mrs. Mackenzie called Caroline from the adjoining bedroom, where she was laying out her mistress's things for dinner, and told her of the Sydney project, and what she wished prepared and packed for the journey. Clothes that were a wicked extravaganza on board ship, and quite beyond the re-

quirements of a reasonable visit, were dragged from drawers and presses, and summarily submitted to inspection. Beautiful fabrics of all sorts, furs, laces, etc., etc., were spread on bed and sofa, table and floor—for Nancy, amongst her many human weaknesses, had a weakness for rich raiment and plenty of it—and to choose amongst them what suited her best, and what Robert would be most likely to approve of, was a fascinating occupation, that absorbed her until nearly dinner-time. It was not until Caroline said, "If you please, ma'am, it only wants ten minutes," that she consented to make a scratch toilet for the evening; and she went down-stairs, pinning her fichu with one hand, and tucking Robert's letter into a place where she could feel it with the other, as the last clang of the gong rumbled through the house. Her brother-in-law, who received her with a proffered elbow at the foot of the stairs, looked at her brilliant face curiously, and remarked, with a brother-in-law's frankness, that he had never seen her so blooming.

"I don't think I ever felt so blooming," she answered, trying not to dance to his sober pace across the hall. "It's this—this exhilarating winter weather, Tom."

All through dinner she was in a bubble of talk

and laughter, varied by abrupt silences, during which she received Tom's best jokes with a vacant gravity that bewildered him; and after coffee she wandered from room to room in a fashion that clearly showed she was too much awake and alive for any bed to hold her. Nevertheless, she was not ashamed to plead fatigue and sleepiness as an excuse for saying good-night early. And then she flew up to her room, put on her furred gown, and spread her bare arms over her writing-table and began a letter to her sweetheart.

"O my Robert! O my darling! I am just wild with joy! I *knew* what you would ask me to do, and, of course, you knew I would do it. Oh, yes, indeed, you may depend on me. I will do all—everything. You don't want me more than I want you. Yes, my love, I will be in town before you. I will be at the 'Grand.' I shall know when the ship arrives, and shall wait in for you. Oh, if we had missed that last meeting in the summer-house, which was such a pure accident—or almost an accident—I could not be sure that you would guess where I was—we should not be having this to look forward to now. But for the chance of Ted Sheffield knowing you, and of my birthday falling when it did, we might never have come together at all. It is awful to think what a narrow

shave it was! And haven't you felt these months as if they were *years*? I have. I know what that 'ache' is. I have had it all the time. I can't believe there are only a few days left. I don't know what my poor sister will say. I dare not tell her yet. She must come down to meet us when we return from Sydney. She will miss me dreadfully, but she has a dear husband and children that she is wrapped up in, and she isn't a fretting person. I feel an unnatural wretch for caring so little about anything except being with you. That seems to be all I want. Do you think I'm a brazen creature, dear, to say this out? Rosamond thinks I make myself very cheap to you—so I do; but I know it doesn't make you cheapen me. I can't help telling you. It is what you wish, isn't it? And I shall never wish anything again but what you wish," etc., etc., etc.

She went on like this for three hours, and filled five sheets, though she expected to see him within a week.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN informed of his sister-in-law's proposed excursion, and the date of departure, Mr. Ellis was seriously, if unnecessarily, distressed because he would not be able to accompany her.

"I should certainly have taken charge of you," he said, "and put you safely into the hands of your friends. But, unfortunately, I have an important business engagement that I can not postpone."

"Oh, thank you, Tom," she responded, smiling at him sweetly; "it's like your kindness to think of such a thing. But I could not have allowed you to take that trouble in any case."

"Nothing is a trouble that I can do for you," he rejoined, with his slightly old-fashioned politeness. "However, I shall see that you are provided with a proper escort."

Nancy's smile fled. "O Tom, pray, *pray* don't!" she pleaded in terror. "I *hate* escorts—except you,

of course. And it's so absurdly unnecessary. I'm not a girl, and I shall have Caroline."

"Well, at least, I will see you on board, and put you in charge of the captain."

At this Rosamond laughed awkwardly, and Nancy's cheeks crimsoned. She felt a mean and deceitful person, for the moment. She wanted to explain that she already knew the captain well, but she could not; the half-truth seemed worse than whole concealment, and she was not yet prepared to tell him all.

"Dear Tom," she continued to protest, "do *please* not trouble about me! I shall be all right with Caroline. We have both been to sea before to-day, and as for Melbourne, we are as much at home there as we are here."

But Mr. Ellis would recede no further. "I shall take you down and see you on board, Nancy. That I can do without the smallest inconvenience, because the business I spoke of is in Melbourne, fortunately, and I shall be going in any case."

There was nothing for it but to write a wild letter to Adelaide, telling Robert what had happened to circumvent their private plans.

"It's no use my going down to meet the ship, and you mustn't call on me on shore. Tom will stick to me like a leech all the time, and if I saw

you in his presence I'm afraid I should betray myself. And then he would want to investigate—he would make no end of fuss, and prevent me from going with you. We must wait till sailing-time next day, hard as it will be. And don't try to see me till the gangways are up. After that we shall be free and safe. I shall have you after that. I sha'n't care what Tom does—dear old fellow! it is all for my benefit, as he thinks—for I shall have you after that, and never be without you any more, I trust—never, never, if it rests with me!”

So Mrs. Mackenzie, Mr. Ellis, and Caroline went to town by the same train, and the *Egypt* was hauling up to the pier at Williamstown at the moment when the latter two persons were counting the luggage at Spencer Street. While the numerous packages were being piled upon a cab, Nancy posted another long letter to her lover, to tell him that she was near, and to encourage him to bear manfully the trial that had been laid upon them both.

Mr. Ellis gave his sister-in-law an elaborate dinner, and took her to the theatre afterwards; it being a point of honour with him to make her enjoy herself while she was in his care. But Nancy was not lively. She accounted for it in the usual way by saying that her head ached. The

fact was, that in this interval between the old life and the new she was feeling the parting with Rosamond and the children much more keenly than she had expected to do. For the first and last time she contemplated the enterprise before her in a slightly foreboding spirit. This mood of reaction was an inevitable consequence of the mood of sanguine exaltation which had strained her for so long.

In the morning it was quite gone, though the morning brought the first dull weather they had had for weeks.

"I think," said Tom, when they met at breakfast, "you would have been wiser to go by train, at this time of the year. You are very likely to have a rough passage."

"Oh, I don't mind that!" she answered, with a happy smile. She did not mind anything now that the great day had come.

She was to sail at two, and at twelve Tom had that particular engagement which had so conveniently fitted in with hers. So she begged him to take her early to the ship and leave her there, protesting that she and Caroline would be glad of a little time to arrange their cabins; and he reluctantly acquiesced, since he could do no better. They reached Williamstown at eleven o'clock, and

walked down the pier in a cold wind and a sprinkle of rain that again caused him to point out the advantages of the land route in winter. And there lay the long steamer, Robert's ship, whose every plank was sacred. Nancy looked at it as if it were Robert himself, with eyes that expressed a longing to put her arms round it and kiss it.

"Captain on board?" inquired Tom, as they stepped on deck.

"No, sir," answered the sailor addressed. "Not for two hours yet, sir."

Mr. Ellis looked round uneasily, and Nancy hastened to reassure him.

"We are all right now, Tom, dear. You needn't mind leaving us. Caroline knows about the luggage, and there's nothing more to do," she urged, in cooing accents. "You had better catch the eleven-fifteen, hadn't you? You can just do it if you make haste. The next one would run you late for your appointment. Good-bye, dear—thank you so much for all your goodness to me—dear, dear old Tom! Good-bye! God bless you!"

To his surprise, she offered her pretty mouth. It was not her habit, nor his, in spite of their strong affection for each other, and this was distinctly a public place; but it gratified him ex-

tremely. He returned her kiss with warmth, earnestly entreated her to take care of herself, and was hustled away.

Nancy was compunctiously watching the gentlemanly figure as it passed down the pier, when a young man, whom she knew at once to be Robert's servant, accosted her, and asked her if she was Mrs. Mackenzie. On her quickly answering to her name, he said the captain had instructed him to show her two cabins that had been reserved for her, and to tell her that both were at her disposal.

"Oh, that's very kind of him," she returned, with a bright blush. To herself she added: "Now supposing Tom had been here, what would he have said to that? Stupid boy! But how sweet of him!"

Robert's servant conducted her down-stairs in a markedly deferential manner, and ushered her and Caroline into the cabins, which were in the same passage and facing each other, each containing two berths. Of course, Nancy had not paid for four berths, but that didn't matter. Robert was the monarch of this kingdom, and not the company, when once it became an island on the high-seas. She took possession of the four beds without scruple, and Caroline filled the upper ones

with clothes and miscellaneous luggage, which left space and comfort on the floor. Having three hours before sailing, and being told that the captain was not expected on board before one o'clock, Mrs. Mackenzie sat in her cabin for some time, and took the opportunity to confide the state of affairs to her maid. Caroline was not overwhelmed with astonishment, because she had been with her mistress at Mrs. Sheffield's four months ago, and all her seven senses were in working order. She knew that Captain Brackenbury was the commander of the *Egypt*, and was prepared for anything. At once she consented to go to England, and to further Nancy's interests generally, as far as a faithful maid could do so; for she quite understood that it would be difficult to better herself by a change of service.

"Then that's all right!" exclaimed Nancy, rising buoyantly. "Now everything is settled."

It was past twelve o'clock, so she washed and brushed, changed her boots, which were a little muddy, and smartened herself to meet her lover. It was not necessary now that they should hide from each other until the gangways were taken in. The English passengers going on to Sydney, and the new ones coming on board, all turned to gaze at her when she appeared on deck in her magnifi-

cent black sables, which were fit for a queen. They rudely stared, in fact, wondering who she was that dressed so richly; but she deigned not to bestow a single casual glance on them. She fixed her eyes upon the pier, and never removed them until, amongst the passengers disgorged by the 12.30 train, she recognised Robert's tall head and square shoulders—the splendid figure that filled the world for her now. It was as splendid as ever, and even more so; a little stouter, a little browner, a little more dignified, with the dignity of great experiences; and everybody seemed to note its special distinction in that crowd of common men. "Here comes the captain," she heard the bystanders say, and the beating of her heart seemed to suffocate her as he drew near. When nearly under the place where she stood, he looked up and recognised her, and lifted his hat. She turned from the rail with dry throat and trembling knees to brace herself for what awaited her; she had an impulse to close her eyes. She dared not look at him again, and yet she saw his every movement—his brisk but stately ascent of the gangway, his polite greeting of the officers who were awaiting him at the top of it, his quick colloquy with some one who asked him something about frozen meat. Then all in a moment he was holding her hand in his

tremendous grip, and speaking to her in the rich, strong voice that she always fancied had the sound of the sea in it.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Mackenzie. You are here before me. Come in."

Still holding her hand, he led her over the raised threshold of a door which had "Commander" printed above it, into the sanctuary of the ship—his own smart cabin, which was the only one on deck. His servant was adding a telegram to a row of letters on the table.

"This came for you just now, sir," said he.

"All right, William."

William went out, and Captain Brackenbury quietly closed the door behind him, and dropped a brass hook into a ring. Then he turned quickly with outstretched arms, into which Nancy simultaneously flung herself; and for two minutes they stood without voice or motion, in an ecstasy of bliss such as is quite unknown to boy and girl lovers who have not sounded the depths of life. It was the kiss they had "ached" for, and it would not be hurried over. Robert sank back upon the sofa behind him, still clasping her tightly, still holding her lips to his, and she lay in his arms with her eyes closed, drawing long breaths, too happy to speak, or even to think. He had to

remember for her where she was, and was man enough to make the effort for self-control that the exquisite moment demanded of him. The first thing he said was, "Have you had any lunch, dearest?"

"No, Robert. I saw the people sitting at the tables. But I could not eat."

"We'll have some together."

He gently put her off his knee, and, rising, took the hook out of the ring and pressed the button of his electric bell. He was opening his letters when William appeared, though his hands shook in doing it, and he glanced over them without much notion of their purport.

"Bring some lunch, William. Mrs. Mackenzie will join me."

"Yes, sir."

"And, William—"

"Yes, sir."

"Mrs. Mackenzie is on board under my charge, and I want her to be comfortable. She will make this her sitting-room till we get to Sydney, and you will wait on her when she wants anything."

"Certainly, sir."

"I've got my own servant, captain," said Nancy, who had recovered herself, and was sitting at ease on the sofa, unbuttoning her furred coat.

"I dare say your own servant will be seasick," he replied. "Ladies' maids always are. Then you'll be glad of William, perhaps," he added, looking at her with keen, loving, mischievous eyes—"perhaps you'll be seasick, too."

"Oh, how *can* you!" she returned, reproachfully. "Seasick on *this* trip! You shouldn't joke about such awful things." She shuddered at the idea of the unspeakable misfortune suggested, and he said he was "sorry he spoke."

William went out, and Robert hastily finished reading his letters. He stood at the end of Nancy's sofa, so that he could put his hand on her somewhere; and she took it in hers, and rubbed her soft cheek up and down the back of it. Then, snatching another kiss before William should return, Captain Brackenbury intimated that he must change his clothes; for he had resumed command of his ship, and was still in the grey tweeds of a private gentleman.

"Then you will want your room, darling?" she said, rising to go.

"No; sit still. I have a place down-stairs. Take off your cloak and bonnet, and make yourself at home. Do you want anything? Shall I send your maid to you?"

Nancy said she wanted nothing, least of all her

maid; and, assuring her that he wouldn't be gone five minutes, her lover left her. She took advantage of his absence to touch up her hair before his looking-glass, to shake out her skirts, and so on. Also, she minutely examined his room—passing her soft palm caressingly over the numerous polished drawers and lockers which held his “things,” taking down his books with the reverent touch of a collector handling mediæval parchments, studying his pair of little pictures—water-colour drawings of his English home, the inspiration of love informed her—with tender eyes that saw the merits of a whole Royal Academy in them. She talked to William as he was laying the table, and William began to feel the working of the charm that so many of his kind had yielded to.

“Have you been with Captain Brackenbury long, William?”

“Nearly six years, ma'am,” said William.

“Six years! You must be very much attached to him?”

“Yes, ma'am. I shouldn't like to have another master now.”

“I hope you never will,” said Nancy, and thought to herself that when she and Robert set up house together, they would have William for their butler—forgetting for the moment that they

would hardly be in a position to afford such an expensive luxury.

Then Robert came back, in his brass-buttoned coat and his gold-laced cap, which latter he hung on a peg when he entered his lady's presence; and the dishes were brought in, and they sat down, *vis-à-vis*, on the two sofas, which also answered the purpose of chairs, and ate a very good lunch in spite of recent agitations. Both doors were fixed half open, and every now and then an officer would come to ask some question of the captain. They could see Mrs. Mackenzie sitting with him, and she expressed the fear that her being present at these interviews was a breach of official etiquette; but Robert told her she need not go away for anybody, and then she greatly enjoyed looking on while he transacted his business. It made her feel as if she were already his wife.

The pilot came, presently, to say it was two o'clock.

"Just let the people come up from the train," Captain Brackenbury replied, as he pared an apple for his guest, "and then I'm ready to start as soon as you like."

And five minutes later he bade Nancy good-bye for a while. He did not commit the indiscretion (which had been unavoidable an hour ago) of

latching the door again, but he still found an opportunity to kiss her before he went. He bade her amuse herself with his books, and ring for tea when she wanted it, and, time being up, went forth to give his undivided attention to his ship, like a good commander. Nancy, of course, did not remain in the cabin after he had left it; it was necessary for her to be where she could see him, however far away; so she put on her fur coat and bonnet, and walked up and down the deck, keeping one eye on the bridge and the other on the operations below, where the great warps were being slacked out and hauled in as the vessel drew off from the pier. The wind was blowing strongly, and the bay was full of broken water, and looked bleak under the grey sky; and the passengers leaning over the ship's rail and the little crowd that watched their laborious departure exchanged opinions with regard to the prospect that were not reassuring to the timid ones. "It's going to blow," they said. "You'll have a dirty night," and so on.

But what did Nancy care? She would have snapped her fingers at a cyclone. When, at the end of twenty minutes, the churning screw began to plough a straight furrow, and the engines to throb steadily like a beating pulse, and the cheers from the shore to grow fainter and fainter, she

realised with a happy heart that she had begun her life's journey with Robert, but she had no sort of prevision of the way it was going to end.

She found the afternoon long, in spite of the distractions of tea and a gossip with Caroline ; for Robert did not come to her. She was proud of his devotion to his duty ; it would have been horrible to imagine the possibility of his neglecting it to be with her ; and yet she wondered, with a vague impatience and surprise, how he could bear to leave her for hours at a stretch, after they had been separated for so long. When it grew too dark to distinguish his figure from others on the distant bridge, she went down-stairs to dress, so as not to have to do it later, when he might be wanting her with him.

She made a hurried toilet, but it was as elaborate as if she were going to a Government House dinner party, though she covered her neck with lace, and tried to tone herself down as much as possible. Over it she wrapped a fur-lined cloak, before going up-stairs, to protect her in the tearing wind that swept the deck, and made it no easy matter to get along from the saloon companion to what she delighted to call her home. When she got back to the little room, now brilliant with the electric light, she found it still empty. Robert

had been, and gone again. She took down one of his books and made herself comfortable on a sofa. She did not read, but she pretended to read, and wondered whether her dear love would think she looked nice when he came in. As she lay, the ship began to heave up and down in a pronounced and sudden manner. She knew what that meant—they were in the Rip. And she thought of Robert's horrible suggestion that she might be seasick. So she kept very still and watched her sensations, and at the end of half an hour was overjoyed to assure herself that she felt as well as ever.

"Oh, how *thankful* I am! That is the *only* thing that *could* have spoiled our trip," she said, first to herself and then to him.

He came in as she was congratulating herself. He looked wind-blown and ruddy, like a Norse rover, with the sea-rime on his yellow beard, and a keen sparkle in his blue eyes like stars in a frosty sky.

"It's a cold night," he said, hanging up his cap, and on the strength of that statement he shut the doors. He did not latch them, but he shut them close. "I mustn't let you take cold," he went on, drawing her to him. "Come here, and let me warm you, sweetheart."

She slipped out of her fur cloak and went to

him, as he stood in the middle of the room, propping himself against the edge of the table; and she laid her head on his breast and put her arms round his neck. He lifted her face with his hands under her chin, and laid his bearded mouth on her responsive lips; and so they stood for a long time, not speaking, but listening acutely to the sounds outside. The ship swung up and down, and from side to side; she could not have stood alone. But his great arms held her up, and held her safe.

A step passed close, and she drew away from him. Before taking her back he looked her all over—her charming, glowing face, her dainty and costly dress, that clothed her graceful figure as if it had grown on it.

“Well?” she said, challengingly.

“Oh, you’re lovely!” he replied. “But haven’t you got any of those pretty gowns you used to wear?—tea-gowns, don’t you call ’em? They go down your back with such a long, straight sweep, don’t you know? I like them better than dress-makers’ dresses.”

“Do you, dear? Well, I like to know what you like. Have you come down to stay, Robert?”

“No, pet.”

“Are you not coming to dinner?”

"William must bring me some dinner on the bridge; but I'll come presently."

He went off again; and as soon as he was gone she groped her way back to the inhabited regions, and, descending to her cabin, tore off the "dress-maker's dress," and put on one of her splendid tea-gowns—a long-tailed robe of Indian cashmere, thick with silk embroidery and lined with quilted satin—which had the essential merit of going down her back in a straight sweep from neck to hem. Caroline was not there to help her, and certain sounds from the opposite cabin suggested that Robert's theory about ladies' maids at sea was being verified.

"O Caroline, you are not ill, are you?" cried Nancy, in the passage between them; and she was aghast to find, as she spoke, that she was beginning to feel far from well herself.

"Yes'm, I am," wailed Caroline, faintly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry for you, poor girl! I will send somebody to you," said Mrs. Mackenzie; and she rushed away in haste. She was not a selfish woman in the ordinary way, but at this moment she could think only of Robert and herself, and for their sakes it was absolutely necessary that she should get on deck at once. She found a stewardess, and thrust half a sovereign into her hand.

"Do what you can for my poor maid," she gasped. "Send the doctor to her—give her some brandy—whatever you think best. I am feeling rather queer myself—I must get into the air." And she staggered to the stairs, scrambled up on deck, and swung into the seat behind the companion doorway just in time to save herself.

Certainly, it was a very wild night. There was an invisible moon behind the driving clouds that reminded her of Douzette's pictures, and the faint light showed such a turmoil of waves as would justify the most hardened passenger in feeling seasick. The wind howled and shrieked above the noise of the throbbing engines; it tore at her flowing skirts, and slapped her face with the ends of the scarf she had tied over her head to keep her hair from disorder. The huge vessel rolled so deeply that she could only maintain her seat by clinging to the bar behind her with all her strength. It was heavier weather now than when she went down-stairs ten minutes ago, but its beautiful freshness took away her qualms and uplifted her with a strange exhilaration. In a few minutes she spied William poking along, and she called him to help her to get back to the captain's cabin.

"That's just what I was coming for, ma'am," said William. "The captain ordered me not to

let you go on deck alone while it's blowing like this."

"Did he? How he thinks of everything! Then give me your arm, William. It *does* blow, doesn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. It'll be a whole gale before midnight."

"I'm glad of it," said she. "One needn't mind gales in a ship like this, with a captain like Captain Brackenbury in command of it."

"No, ma'am, that's true. They say he's the best commander in the service."

"I am sure of it, William."

She got home safely, a little dishevelled, and with her cheeks glowing; and William asked her whether she would have her dinner there or in the saloon. She told him she did not dare to return to the saloon, because she felt ill as soon as she went below, whereas she was quite well on deck. So he, with equal difficulty and devotion, served her with a little meal in his master's cabin, and she made a careful choice of pacifying dishes—an English sole, a bit of broiled chicken, a spoonful of jelly—to which William added a small bottle of champagne. "The captain ordered it for you, ma'am; he thought it might do you good, as the weather is rough," said William. Whereupon,

of course, she drank it with pleasure, if not with actual avidity.

And the food and wine both did her good. When Robert came down in the evening he found her bright and gay, without the least sensation of illness. "I never was better," she joyfully assured him. "It was only while I was below, Robert, that I felt a little queer."

"Then you shall not go below again," he said, promptly. "William shall make my bed on the bridge, and you shall sleep here. Caroline can come up to wait on you."

"Caroline can't. She's dreadfully ill, poor girl!"

"Then a stewardess shall—or William."

"I'll have William," said Nancy, who had travelled enough to be accustomed to male chambermaids, and who found it delicious to be waited upon by the same hands that served her lover. "I shall not undress, Robert. I will lie on the sofa with some pillows. My gown is a loose one, and I shall be quite comfortable. I could not sleep in all this noise."

"You are not nervous, are you?"

"Nervous? With *you*! What a preposterous idea!"

"I thought not. All right, Nancy. Don't

undress to-night. Then you can come up presently and watch on the bridge with me."

She breathed a long "Oh-h-h!" of rapture at this enchanting prospect.

"Only you'll spoil that beautiful gown. Did you put it on for me? You darling woman! But the decks are drenched with spray, and you'll have it ruined." She smiled complacently as he passed his great brown hand over her sleeve. "What colour do you call it, Nancy? Lavender?"

"No, my dear; it is a most exquisite shade of blue—or green—I don't know which. Something the colour of a duck's egg, or like the sky sometimes at night before it gets quite dark."

"Or like the sea," he suggested.

"Yes, yes—that's it! I wonder I never thought of that. It is the colour of the sea—that must be why I chose it. And the embroidery, you see, is darker, like fine sea-weed. And the lining"—turning it up to show the quilted satin—"is the very tint of the lining of a sea-shell. In fact, they call it shell-pink at the shops; that's its technical name."

"And you are going up on the bridge in *that*?"

"I am," said Nancy, firmly.

There was but one drawback to these sweet interviews; they were necessarily brief. The ship

claimed the same attention from her commander as when no Nancy was on board, and, to do him justice, received it. The only difference he made (and no one but himself knew his reason for making it) was to set the course rather farther out from land than was his habit in these waters. Twice he went to his post, and came back. After his return the second time one of his officers came to the cabin to make a report, and after him the doctor. When they entered they pretended not to see the brilliant person whose presence there at that hour must have greatly surprised them, though both can reproduce very vividly the impression that she made upon them, which was remarkably distinct. She did not speak to the first comer; he looked rigidly official, and she was in awe of quarter-deck conventions. But the ship's doctor is always a person one may take liberties with, and she ventured to speak to him of the rough weather, and to make some inquiries about Caroline. It seemed to please him very much, and Robert did not look as if any great breach of etiquette had been committed.

And now came the most delicious hour of all, when, in defiance of the company's rules and regulations, she shared her lover's vigil at his post of duty. It was late by this time. The wet decks

were deserted; all the passengers below were gone to bed; the electric lights were out. She pinned the skirt of her gown round her waist, and Robert wrapped her in the fur cloak, and pulled the hood over her head, and tied her scarf over the hood; and they went forth into the howling night, which, though there was a moon somewhere, looked pitch-dark by contrast with the brightness of the room behind them. It was full of flying spray and intermittent gushes of rain.

"O Robert, what a wind!" she gasped, as she clung to him. It took her breath away.

"Never mind, it is with us," he answered, cheerily.

She did not mind. On the contrary, she revelled in it. Wind and rain and storm, and Robert's strong arm round her! The conditions were absolutely perfect. She could not see where she was going, nor did she try to; he guided and upheld her along the slanting deck, and up the slippery stairs to that Olympian throne in mid-air on which he had seemed so far withdrawn from her till now; and there she stood beside him at the rail, and looked out upon the most beautiful and terrible of all the scenes that she remembered. The sea was mountainous, unlike any sea she had ever seen—never having been on a steamer's bridge at mid-



night in a full gale before. The wind, Robert told her, was blowing at something like eighty miles an hour. It was fair for their own ship, which flew before it; but they passed two others coming from Sydney, and they were so smothered in the wild froth that they looked as if they were burrowing under water. Nancy took them for foundering wrecks, until Robert reassured her. There was the faint moon and a few stars in the stormy sky. There was a sense, to Nancy's soul, of being out of the world that had held her for thirty-one years, and free in the Infinite with her true-love.

She watched with him for two hours—the most deeply happy hours of all her happy life. She walked with him to and fro in the Rembrandt light that revealed her face to their silent companions at intervals like a lovely spectre of the night. She stood by him when he gave his orders, and leaned with him over the table in the chart-room when he consulted his charts and explained to her how he knew that the ship was making sixteen knots an hour. They were never quite alone, as they had sometimes been down-stairs; but that was no drawback to her, if it was to him. She felt herself sharing his whole life now, and not only one part of it.

Between one and two o'clock he brought her

back to the deck, and they had a few last minutes together.

"I have got so *used* to it!" she said, when he took her in his arms to bid her good-night.

"Ay," he answered, "so have I."

"But we can't do this sort of thing on the long voyage, Robert. All the other ladies would revolt. It would be a public scandal. But, oh, how can I ever bear to come down to being a mere common passenger again!"

"It strikes me, Nancy, that we shall have to get married in Sydney, after all."

"O Robert!"

"And then break the regulations of the company."

She trembled all over, but she did not shrink. "You would cut the sea, as you call it, when we got home," she said. "So it would not much matter if they did scold you."

"I don't know about that, Nancy."

"O darling, you *said* so!"

"I should have to get another post first. I'm not rich, you know."

"Never mind. I shall have enough for both of us."

"You? I thought you lost everything if you married again."

"All but a thousand a year. I shall have that. Don't you think that, with a thousand a year, you can afford to cut the sea? It isn't much, but don't you think it would be enough?"

"Don't you think a man would be a mean sort of fellow to live on his wife's money?"

"Don't you think a man would be a mean sort of fellow to leave his wife to break her heart, out of mere false pride and vanity?"

His heart throbbed fast as he held her to it.

"You sweet woman!" he said, passionately, under his breath. "If I wanted ever so much to leave you, I know I couldn't do it—after this!"

She put her arms round his bent neck.

"We must never part, Robert—never, never, never again!"

"We never will," he answered.

Then he rang for William, and bade her good-night. "Sleep well," he said, "and be fresh in the morning. We've got to-morrow to look forward to."

"Yes, love. And all the to-morrows after that." She went with him to the door and took a step into the outside darkness, holding his hand to the last moment.

William came in with an armful of white pil-

lows, which he piled into the inner corner of the sofa on the lee side. She lay down peacefully, with a seraphic smile on her face, and he spread an opossum rug over her, and tucked up her feet, and put cushions between the sofa and the edge of the table, so that she could swing softly to the rolling of the ship, like a nestling baby.

"You would make a good lady's maid, William," she said, in her gentlest accents.

"Thank you, ma'am," said William.

When he had left her she lay very still and closed her eyes, trying hard to go to sleep, as Robert had bidden her, so that she might be fresh in the morning. Though so thoroughly accustomed to warmth and softness, she had never felt so perfectly comfortable. Nine-tenths of the poor passengers below were agonisingly ill by reason of the motion of the vessel in the storm, but here she only felt it as if gentle arms were rocking her to rest. Both doors of the cabin were fastened half open, and the delicious air kept all thought of sickness from her. Between the doors, flanking the covered washstand and the mirror above it, William had lit two bracket lamps, and the subdued light showed her what a calm and orderly little nest she occupied in the midst of that howling turmoil. She heard all the noise, but it did

not touch her peace; it made it all the more deeply peaceful. The steady, strong pulse of the engines, that no storm could disturb, was the sound that harmonised with her thought of herself as in Robert's safe keeping.

However, she could not sleep. Thought was too active and feeling too intense. Conscientiously she tried all the devices she could think of to induce the condition that should refresh and recruit her for the blessed to-morrow that was to be to-day over again; but the more she tried, the further she was off. Seeing this, she presently gave up trying, and abandoned herself to the contemplation of waking visions far more beautiful than any dreams could give her. These, naturally, had no sedative effect; they made her restless, and her restlessness increased as the night wore on. She found the opossum rug on the top of her quilted gown too hot. She had a fidgetty desire from time to time to know what o'clock it was, and was vexed that she had left her watch downstairs. She craved for the morning to come, that would bring her lover back to her.

By-and-by she rose and went to the door. She wanted to see whether there was any sign of dawn, and was rejoiced to discover a pale streak—not so pale in reality as she imagined it—across

the welter of big seas that were as wild as ever. The pure, cold salt wind blew revivingly in her face; the rain had ceased; the sky looked clear, though the moon was below the horizon. It was not day yet, but day was at hand, and she was sure it was going to be lovely.

For some minutes she stood in the doorway, propping herself against the jamb, and gazing with awed but quiet eyes into the vast obscurity that surrounded her. Then she had the fatal impulse to step out on deck—it was level and steady for the moment—to see whether she could discern any outline of the bridge, any shadow of her lover's figure against the sky. Her hands were rolled in the ends of the scarf she had tied over her head; the long skirt of her gown was round her feet, as she turned for an instant, unsupported, upon the slippery planks, to look up to that point in the general darkness where Robert was supposed to be; and in that instant, before there was time even to scream—it was as if some monster of the deep had thrust out a savage claw and seized her—the ship tilted suddenly and violently, she was flung backwards upon the rail, and tossed like a wind-blown feather over it; and there was an end to the new-born happiness that had presumed to call itself perfect.

No one saw her go. There was no gleam on the waves from her sea-coloured gown; her white face was undistinguishable from the foam that smothered it; she was too paralysed by the icy coldness of the water and her horror of despair to utter a cry for help. Robert, all unconscious of his loss, was calmly measuring the ship's pace on a chart with a pair of compasses, and congratulating himself on his sixteen knots, while she, sinking alone and unhelped in the eternal deeps, saw its funnels smoking against the stars a mile away.

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She had, as we say, "simply nothing in her," and she certainly was a little minx, from the point of view of all strictly proper people. Still, when she was gone, there were left in many lives great blanks which her betters could not fill.

"She was so human," says Robert Brackenbury, in the rare, soft moments when he can bring himself to speak of her. "Not intellectual, not highly accomplished, not anything in particular—only that; human in every sweet bit of her, a woman all through—"

At which point words fail him, choked with inward tears.

In his cabin on the *Egypt* hangs a photograph of her—he received it from Rosamond Ellis six

months after the fatal voyage, lying in a London hospital, with a shaved head—a picture that lives with him wherever he goes. There she stands, with her easy, confident air, looking at him with her pretty eyes and half-smiling mouth, exactly as she used; and she wears the sea-coloured tea-gown that was her shroud. What made her get photographed in that? The sea-weed embroidery comes out beautifully, like delicate grey lace—a dreadful detail. The likeness is perfect.

“‘This much is saved from chance and change,’”

he says to himself, contemplating the lifeless presentment of what was once so rich in life. And the thought comes to him, as it comes to many more who loved her, that she was not born for the common fate—not meant for rheumatism and lumbago, for cap and spectacles—like other men’s wives. “Other men’s wives,” he tells himself, “grow old, grow cross, grow wearisome; but my wife—for she was my wife—will always be like this, beautiful and young, with eyes full of love, a complete and perfect woman, unspoilable, unchangeable, through all the wrinkling, hair-whitening, heart-paralysing years.”

It is not a thought that comforts him yet, while he is still in the prime of his lusty manhood,

when the shadow in place of the substance is too tantalising to bear sanely. But it will comfort him some day. Then he will marry a wife like other men's wives, and she will become the reality of his life, and his "perfect woman" but a dream.

THE END.



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